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FANTASTIC
STORIES OF IMAGINATION

DECEMBER 1961
Volume 10 Number 12

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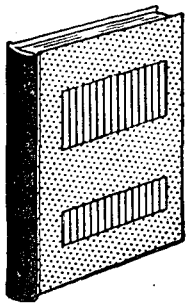

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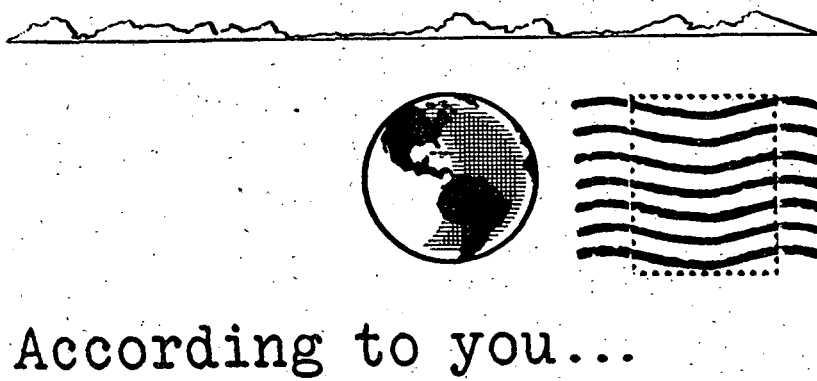

According to you...

Dear Editor:

I would like to express an opinion on what has developed into a controversial subject: the short stories of David R. Bunch. I realize that the sole purpose of your magazine is to entertain—in fact, the sole purpose of the field. Mr. Bunch's stories show one facet that is encountered frequently; his stories show a mastery of writing, a smooth flow of language, and carry the reader along quite well. However, the subject matter appears from the most impartial viewpoint to be very unimportant—almost to the point of triteness. I have read, I must confess, only two of Mr. Bunch's vignettes concerning the world of the future—Moderan, as he ineptly titles it—but I can say that the two ("The Warning" and "The Flesh-Man from the East"—or was it West?) took about 1500 words each to state its slogan of Moderan—one being "We Like to Hate", and the other "We Like to Kill". One of these, by itself, would be amusing, perhaps ironically stated enough to be good. Two simply flood the reader with an attitude of unconcern. I do not know how many other stories there are concerning this world of the future, but I suppose that they all are constructed in the same way—a sequence of events leading up to the denouement of the Motto of the Day.

Apparently, the feature by Sam Moskowitz will never appear in FANTASTIC, being confined to your sister (brother?) magazine. I think that Mr. Moskowitz should write some features on fantasy writers (Hubbard — Kuttner — Bond — Howard) and have them published in FANTASTIC. Is there any possibil-

(Continued on page 127)

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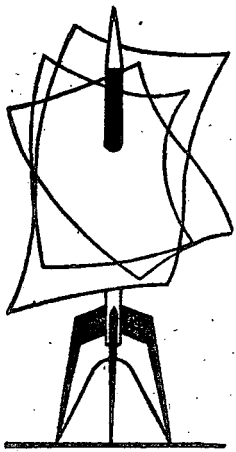

IN a world of space probes and satellites, we have come to think that fact consistently follows fantasy; that the dream or the scheme always precedes the accomplishment. This month, however, we offer an example of fantasy based on fact. The fantasy: the remarkable novelet of meteoritic life-forms, *Spawn of Doom*, written for this issue by Daniel Galouye. The fact: scientific evidence that meteorites may contain living matter from other worlds.

The theme for the novelet came to us not long ago while reading of a paper presented at the New York Academy of Sciences. Three chemists announced that their analyses of a segment of a meteorite that fell in France 98 years ago revealed the presence of organic compounds that had been created by living plants or animals.

What they discovered in the fragment were several complex hydrocarbon structures; the same kind that occur in petroleum deposits on earth, where they are considered the chemical remains of extinct plants, fishes, bacteria or animals that lived geological ages ago. To make sure the compounds were not *actually* of earthly origin, the scientists double-checked every possibility that they might have found their way into the meteorite *after* it had plummeted to Terra. They even made sure that although the crust of the rock had been baked to 1800 degrees F. by its entry into the atmosphere, the interior of the meteorite had gotten no hotter than 360 degrees F.—not hot enough to alter the complex molecular structure of the compounds. The odds against the compounds having been created at random by non-living processes are estimated to be in the magnitude of one billion to one.

Meanwhile, other researchers working with a meteoric bit from Kentucky found that dust from the fragment, placed in sterile solutions, yielded wiggling sausage-like bodies about as big as bacteria—*but not in any way similar to any known earthly bacteria.* Of course, they might be a previously unknown terrestrial bug that worked its way *into* the meteorite. On the other hand, they might represent life from another planet, or another system. Neither hydrocarbon compounds nor microscopic wigglers come anywhere near being as dramatic as Mr. Galouye's red spores. But they will do for the time being.

—N.L.

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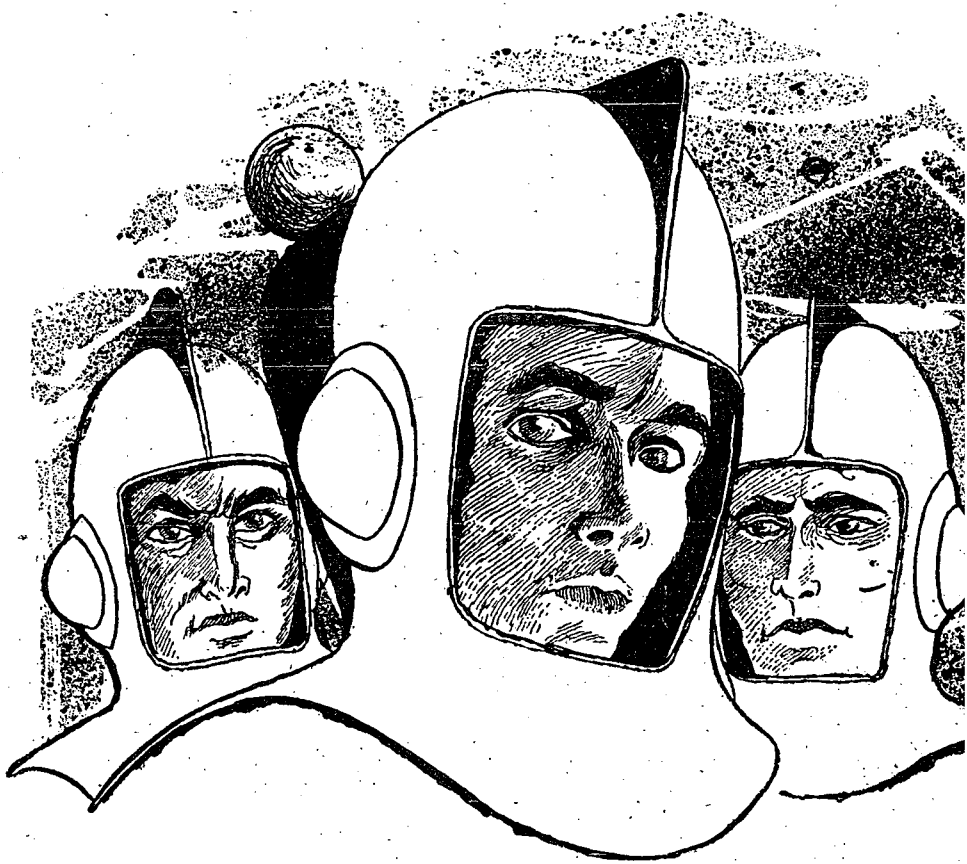
Somewhere on Earth, Chvraul the Lumarian knew, was an EGMite—a bit of living horror dangerously close to a terrestrial sporing. Chvraul hoped to his private god that there was nothing else living on the planet.



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SPAWN of DOOM

ENGAGING its null-emanation shield, the Lumarian patrol craft slipped unobtrusively out of hyperspace and settled into a pre-programmed orbit.

Commander Chvraul drew a relieved breath of high methane-content atmosphere and settled back in his chair. On the control panel, winking lights and fluctuating indicators offered easy, graceful confirmation that all was well—thus far.

But the Lumarian commander could not share the electronic euphoria of his ship—not when he was so grimly aware that its EGM-flux detectors had brought them face-to-face, so to speak, with another EGMite.

"Ship stabilized in orbit, sir," came the telepathic report from Penork in observation.

"Very well." Chvraul sent back the impression of a mental sigh, more resignation than relief. "I'll want prompt reports in data classifications one through four."

By DANIEL F. GALOUYE

Illustrator KILPATRICK

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"We're working on it now."

Chvraul closed his eyes and ran weary fingertips over his ponderous forehead.

Down there—somewhere down there on that warm, blue-green world—was an EGMite. One perhaps dangerously close to reproducing. Fortunately, it would not be a cosmic sporing—only a terrestrial one. But that made matters only *potentially* less dangerous, the consequences of the situation only *immediately* tolerable.

He simply hoped to God there was *nothing else* on the planet.

The probability that the world was otherwise uninhabited contributed nothing to Commander Chvraul's sense of well being. EGMite patrol work was tedious, perilous. And the Lumarian could feel the onus of the years that had descended upon him like stifling dust while he dedicated a lifetime to the cause. Now all the glamor and excitement had finally gone out of the eternal struggle. There remained only devotion to duty to sustain him during these drab, fruitless years.

"C-type civilization down there, sir." Penork's communicative thoughts, edged with the enthusiasm of youth, intruded harshly. "Single species domination, electromagnetic technology, orbital craft. Surface profusely habitated."

Well, there it was, the ultimate complication, the dread of every patrolman—tracking down an EGMite only to find it insidiously sharing the environment of an intelligent, probably susceptible but well-intentioned species.

"Wonderful," he acknowledged sarcastically. "That means if we can't root it out before it spores, we'll have to sacrifice an entire culture."

"But you don't mean—that is, I didn't think—"

"Never been in on the fragmentation of a world, have you, Penork?"

"No, I—that is—yes."

"But not a civilized one—right?"

"No, sir."

"I haven't either. So it won't be any easier on me."

"But maybe there's some other—"

"No other way. Either we find the EGMite before it reproduces or we back off to optimum range and let go at that world with maximum firepower. That way we deprive the EGMite and its thousands of progeny, for the moment at least, of their source of electro-gravito-magnetic energy. Without an appreciable EGM force to tap, they'll be frozen in immaturity."

"Yes, commander."

"The only other way is to find the EGMite and destroy it—if we can get close enough."

"Oh, we'll manage. We'll—"

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"Sure," Commander Chvraul agreed cynically. "I was in on one other EGMite kill. We were lucky. There were glowing reports on that action. But nothing was said about the twenty-six patrol ships that *didn't* come back."

SUBLIMELY conscious of the incredible power flowing into its pulsating energy reservoirs, the EGMite drowsed in its crude vessel. Close around, it could detect the gentle magnetic pattern of ferrous deposits that had twice been modified by incandescence.

Life was wonderfully satisfying; would be even more so, the EGMite sensed, when full maturity soon brought complete appreciation of the vital fields of basic energy that enveloped it like a warm, vibrant mantle.

There had been a time, during its spore stage, when existence was colorless and cold, dismal, utterly uneventful.

But, without the G-component of the tripartite universal force, how could it possibly be otherwise?

Then had come the great and welcome heating that had brought about the first stirrings of consciousness, the pristine awakening.

Next, marvelous impact, followed by delightful cooling—kinetic and thermodynamic processes that imparted even more intriguing dissonance to the EGM flux.

And rest, rest, rest.

Invigorating slumber under a cascade of delicious gravitational quanta.

Oh, what a massive body its supplier of the G-constant force must be! Even now the EGMite could feel the vitalizing torrent of electro-gravito-magnetic sustenance surging into its being, adding mass and strength, filling a myriad energy reservoirs. Already the flow had set attractor and repulsor cups and the tentacles supporting them tingling with anticipation.

Oh, the incomparable glory of power! The grandeur of devastating energy! The omnipotence of force that could be converted and directed and concentrated—if necessary, or just for pure delight—to dislodge huge chunks from the surface of the host mass!

But it was not yet time for ostentatious display of authority. Always, hostility might possibly be lurking somewhere in the environment. Of that much the EGMite was instinctively aware.

The time for demonstration and experimentation, for self-gratifying testing of potential would have to wait at least until after the first terrestrial sporing and broadcasting of seed.

Perhaps it wouldn't have to

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use its power, other than for auto-propulsion, until the cosmic sporing. Then, all the energy it had been storing from its richly endowed EGM surroundings would be loosed for the first time —roiling and ripping out great gobs of ferrite-impregnated matter. These it would use as vessels for implantation of the cosmic spores. And then, finally, would come the keen satisfaction of defying the G-constant and hurling the spore-laden vessels into the mouth of the universe.

Drunk with eager expectation of the pure bliss of reproduction and broadcasting that lay ahead, the EGMite settled back impatiently within the confines of the coarse receptacle its parent had provided eons ago and half a galaxy away. And, for the first time, it turned its attention to the physical features immediately outside its receptacle.

IT would be incorrect to say the EGMite opened its eyes to the things about it—other than in a figurative sense. For vision would be superfluous where electro-gravito-magnetic anastomosis of an organism with its environment is the basis of sentience.

Nevertheless, what the EGMite *did* perceive disturbed it. There was regularity. And it abhorred physical order and symmetry as much as it would discipline of any sort in the EGM flux.

Immediately surrounding its charred, pock-marked receptacle, for instance, were six smooth surfaces converging at eight apexes, such that every plane managed to meet four others at right angles. And, at a further distance, the same physical pattern was repeated. In the greater planes, however, there were occasional rectangular openings. (More despicable order.) One of the nearer openings distinguished itself by admitting a wealth of electromagnetic emanations of pleasing irregularity.

Both that rectangle and the smaller cube within a cube containing its receptable, the EGMite reasoned, must be pervious to low-frequency radiant energy. Otherwise the delicate force of mid-spectrum EM-radiation wouldn't be reaching it directly.

Then the EGMite tensed.

Regularity, symmetry on a medium scale meant intelligence.

And intelligence always meant hostility.

Some of the creature's sense of security flowed off as it realized it might, under the circumstances, be forced to use its accumulating power in order to insure a chance for terrestrial sporing.

But wait—there was something else!

More artificiality—more hate-

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ful pattern. This time the order it detected was *not* physical. It was a brazen desecration of the electromagentic flux itself! There was a harsh phasing of part of the background flow—the development of a wave pattern.

And this creature that enjoyed parasitic dependence upon the basic unified force revulsed over the audacity of an intelligence that would disturb the underlying EGM disharmony.

Immediately filled with malevolent hate, it resolved (as any other EGMite would have done under similar circumstances) to purge its entire environment of all concordance for its own safety and that of its progeny.

SANDWICHED between a residential and commercial section, Carswell Foundation Museum, recently renovated, refurbished and restaffed during reform depoliticalization, napped in the warmth of a late spring afternoon. Its Parthenonlike colonnade, deserted and deep in shadow, mutely resounded the distant noise of downtown traffic.

Taking full advantage of the lull, Gene Cunningham, curator, moved pensively from exhibit to exhibit in Display Room C.

Trailing dutifully behind, Peg Torrence, whom he had borrowed from archives, kept pencil and pad busy making notations of the displays that he occasionally tapped with a ruler.

"This one'll have to go too," he said decisively as he paused in front of the mummy case.

"Not old Kutenmaden?" The girl affected an inflection of protest.

Cunningham nodded with feigned sobriety and smiled. "Storage for Mr. K. Never should have been here in the first place. If we ever get enough for a section on Egyptology, we'll resurrect him."

"Down to the basement with one Mr. K," she parroted, making the notation. Then she gripped the pencil between even teeth in order to free a hand, with which she brushed a wisp of blond hair back in place.

Cunningham, to the casual observer, would have appeared decidedly out of character as a museum curator. Youthful, tanned and proportioned in a manner more suggestive of outdoor pursuit, he had all his hair and it was still monochromatic—brown. That he was in charge here, however, was a direct result of the out-with-the-old-in-with-the new spirit which had swept the museum board following dismissal of patronage appointees.

And it would certainly seem that Miss Torrence, too, would be ill at home in archives. Her trim, fahionable skirt and blouse, the hint of adventuring spirit in her

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upturned nose, the restless animation of her glance—all strongly verified that a museum should not be the most likely place to find Peg. That she *was* there was but another consequence of administrative reform.

Moving on Cunningham wielded his ruler, arbitrarily meting out relegation to the catacombs for a display case containing swords, scimitars, stilettos and lances.

At that point the arched entrance to Display Room C disgorged a raucous, scampering group of second-graders, trailed by a somewhat disconcerted, matronly woman. Her listing pince-nez suggested regret over having mounted the afternoon's academic expedition.

"All right, children," she called uncertainly after her scattering charges, "careful now! And don't *touch* anything!"

MORE than half the class was instantly attracted to an interior illuminated diorama of an Indian village while a smaller group congregated about the mastodon skeleton.

Two tykes brushed past Cunningham and Miss Torrence, one of them dividing his interest between the sarcophagus for which he was heading and the seventh inning of the Yank-Oriole game coming in over his portable transistor.

The other pulled up and returned to tug at the curator's coat. "Hey, mister—what's that thing, huh?"

"That," offered Peg, laying a hand on the boy's tousled red hair, "is the renown Mr. K of Egyptian derivation—all wrapped up for centuries."

"Huh?"

Just then the schoolmarm came up, dragging along a neatly-dressed, pig-tailed little miss who was busy licking the remains of an ice-cream cone off her fingertips.

"Now, Jimmy," the teacher remonstrated, "leave the nice people alone. And, Tommy, turn down that radio. I do declare," she added, facing Cunningham and Miss Torrence, "these children are too much for me. Henry! Don't touch that case!"

She sighed and went on garrulously. "If only they were all like little Betty here. I'd—"

"Not much you can do but give them their rein at that age," Cunningham sympathized.

"Hey, Miss Thompson," cried one of the larger boys, his eyes fastened curiously on the Newfoundland Meteorite display. "What's this big rock doing here, huh?"

"Now, Charles," she cautioned, moving off toward the boy, "mind that you don't—"

Just then there was the thud of sudden impact and Display

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Room C was abruptly relieved of the baseball announcer's rasping voice.

Cunningham—not quite certain that he hadn't heard a half repressed, unmatronly "oh, hell!"—turned in time to see the shattered remains of Tommy's transistor radio falling to the floor against the far wall.

Instantly Miss Thompson deserted little Betty and headed for the boy, her finger wagging reproachfully. "Tommy, why on earth did you have to fling your radio like that?"

"Honest, I didn't do nothin'."

"I didn't do *anything*,' she corrected ceremoniously.

"He didn't do nothing', Miss Thompson," Jimmy verified. "The radio just—flew over there.

Adding to the commotion, Betty, abandoned beside the meteorite display case, began crying and rubbing her eyes as she backed away from the charred, fused hunk of stone.

Torn between conflicting necessities, Miss Thompson hovered indecisively between both sources of disturbance. Finally she decided the little girl's predicament, whatever it might be, was the more urgent.

"What in the name of Heaven is the matter, Betty?" She knelt beside the child.

"That ugly, mean, ol' rock," Betty sobbed. "It stuck its tongue out at me!"

WITH most of the crew assembled in the briefing compartment, Commander Chvraul paced purposefully, as though the brisk physical movement would help conceal, from both his men and himself, some of the outward and inner effects of the inevitable aging process.

The grim silence of the room remained unruffled as he paused decisively, faced the assembly and telepathed:

"I'm going to dwell on EGMites. I'm an old hand at this business and there isn't a one of you who's not birth-colored behind the ears when it comes to patrol tactics. All you know is what you've been taught at the Academy. Well, I'm going to set a few things straight."

Penork entered, pausing just inside the hatch. "There seems to be a lot of architectural development down there, Commander. They're Lumarianoid but nontelepathic, except possibly in a receptive capacity."

Chvraul's face remained expressionless. "Is that all?"

Penork fingered the vestigial ridge of hair that was his distinguishing mark of youthfulness. "One other detail: Atmosphere's type D-3—nitrogen-oxygen. means we'll need suits if we have to go down."

"You just report the data. I'll draw the conclusions."

The commander turned back

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toward his crew. "You were all in on that exchange so you know what the situation is. Number one decision, Penork, is this: Get off a tele-EM alert to all patrol craft in the quadrant; I want a general convergence. If, when they get here, there are no survivors left among us and if the EGMite still shows up on their detector screens, they are to assume sporing has already occurred. In that case they're to fragmentize that world without delay."

"Is sporing *that* close?" Penork asked.

"In my judgment it could happen before we complete the next three or four orbital laps."

Penork left to attend to the message.

"Zauvex." The commander nodded toward another crew member. "You take care of maneuvering the ship into stationary orbit. We've pinpointed the EGMite within ten surface degrees. Once we get in position over that area we'll bombard it with a two-thirty cycle GM wavefrom and try to keep it off balance long enough to prevent sporing. That might give us time to draw up a plan of attack or await reinforcement."

AFTER Zauvex had gone, Chvraul spread his legs, clasped hands behind his back and drew in a deep breath.

"Actually, EGMite patrol craft are like cadmium rods in a primitive reactor. We are figuratively charged with the mission of dampening fission and preventing runaway chain reaction. For the infestation of EGMites in the galaxy would easily be a chain reaction were it not for us.

"All advanced civilization, regardless of species, is based on manipulation of at least one of the basic universal forces. But EGMites can't tolerate gravitic, electric or magnetic modulation of any sort. So their first function as an organism is to destroy civilization wherever they find it."

He paused to let that much have its effect. And, as it did, he watched the last few smiles drain from the faces of those men who were experiencing their first time out with the patrol.

"What do you mean," someone asked, "when you compare EGMites with a chain reaction?"

Chvraul gestured with his hands as he telepathed his answer. "Let's consider that one EGMite seed, as a result of a million-to-one chance, lands on a planet following a successful cosmic sporing. That represents penetration of a nucleus by a high-energy, subatomic particle. Cosmic sporing, undertaken by that EGMite's ten thousand descendants, represents the violent release of other subatomic particles, each of which in turn takes

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its millions-to-one chance of landing on a cosmic body with a gravitic field strong enough to sustain it and its descendants."

He saw that his analogy was making an impression and that provided him with renewed enthusiasm.

"That EGMite down there will produce ten thousand seeds. They, in turn, will join their parent in cosmic sporing. That will mean a hundred million spores being scattered in all directions into the celestial reaches. Due to the predominance of nothingness in interstellar space, almost all of those spores, protected in meteoric matter, will travel at translight speed throughout all eternity, never even approaching a gravitational field in which they could grow.

"A handful will be attracted to annihilation in stellar bodies. But one and a fraction out of our original hundred million will approach a planet along the exact gradient that will decelerate its vessel to conventional speed. It will have its plunge cushioned by an atmosphere, will survive incandescence and will succeed in both terrestrial and cosmic sporing."

The commander imparted great force to his next string of communicative thoughts:

"Gentlemen, it takes only one and the *most negligible* fraction to make it a chain reaction rather than a static situation. We are the control factor. We keep the ratio down to less than one. We only hope that, with advancing patrol and attack technology, we'll eventually be able to find and destroy every EGMite in existence, even every spore in transit. Until we do, no advanced culture will be safe."

No one breathed for a long while—until after Chvraul added even more somberly:

"Naturally, we are most regretful that once in a millennium we run into such a situation as we now face. But the patrol does not exist only for the protection of Lumarians. Its work is in the interest of all species everywhere. For that reason we don't have to search too far for justification when it becomes necessary to sacrifice one of those cultures for the security of all the others."

DEEP in avid anticipation of the pleasures to come, the EGMite was able for the moment to ignore the flux-disrupting disturbances that seemed to abound in its environment.

This temporary tolerance, of course, was due to the fact that full maturity had not quite arrived. For with complete development would come absolute sensitivity. Then its field converters and energy reservoirs would no longer be able to stand the strain of even token waveform concord.

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Disregarding its mounting discomfort, though, the creature occupied itself with combing from the instinct patterns of ancestral experience the intriguing details of terrestrial sporing in which it would soon engage. The stimulating process of physico-flux mitosis and encystment. The yielding of spores through delivery orifices into each of its repulsor cups.

Oh what joy!

Then there would be emergence from its crude vessel so that it could gain an unobstructed vantage for broadcasting.

And then the rapture of the scattering ritual!

Thousands of seeds, propelled with sufficient force to gain great height above and velocity across the surface of the G-generating body.

When the spores drifted back down, there would be many pre-EGMite organisms attached to and sucking voraciously from the G-source.

And soon a myriad, practically indestructible EGMites would be thriving, reaching swiftly for maturity, eager to consummate their existence by joining in the once-in-a-lifetime exaltation of cosmic sporing.

Abruptly all complacency was flushed from the EGMite's being by the fiercest waveform concord imaginable. The monotonous phasing was torturous, relentless. Up and down, trough and peak, incline after incline—a mad pattern of modulation in both amplitude and frequency. And the creature writhed in protest, desperately trying to reject the order and fluctuating purpose that had been brutally imposed on the disarray of unified force.

Frantically, the EGMite readied its repulsor cups for instant defensive response. But it only pulled back, hurt and afraid. It *could not locate* the source of its agony! Whatever was generating the excruciating waveform was not part of the G-mass, not a component of the immediate universal field. And how could the EGMite protect itself if it couldn't even find its assailant?

In desperation, it struck out finally and indiscriminately, wielding its battery of repulsor cups through an orifice in its ferrous vessel.

There! That heinous pattern of electromagnetic discharge—just outside the nearer plane of the greater cube.

Of course, that mobile thing, so near, so disgusting in the regularity of its E-component emanations, couldn't be the source of the great, vindictive disturbance. But, at least, it was something on which the EGMite could vent its frenzied hate.

Energy surged vengefully from reservoirs to repulsor cups and discharged in an awesome

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burst of kinetogenic G-component.

In the next instant the same flux was diverted to attractor cups which refined and radiated negative G-component.

And when the EGMite had finished there was no longer any trace of the lesser waveform disturbance.

But how could it locate and eliminate the greater, intolerable phase pattern that was pouring down on it from somewhere out there in the cosmos?

There was nothing in its ancestral memory to offer any suggestions.

PARKING was rarely a problem at Carswell Foundation Museum—not for staff members, anyway.

On this particular morning, however, such was not the case. The driveway was blocked off by a police emergency squad car and by a fire truck with engine idling and hose strewn about it in lazy coils.

Confronted by these obstacles, Gene Cunningham pulled up against the curb and started uncertainly after a police officer and fireman who were just disappearing around the corner of the building.

As he cut through the colonnade and swung around the front of the museum he didn't expect to see the two toppled columns. Nor could he have anticipated the twisted, almost unrecognizable wreckage of an automobile that hugged the stump of the farther shorn pillar.

He squirmed through the handful of curious spectators, who were beginning to drift off, and confronted the officer. "What happened?"

"All right," the policeman snapped. "Back up. You're right where the wrecker's got to get."

"I'm with the museum," Cunningham explained.

"Oh. You the curator?"

"Right."

"I guess the driver lost control. Happened sometime during the night."

Asking whether the motorist had survived, Cunningham saw, would be questioning the obvious. "You mean he jumped a hundred feet of lawn and still had enough momentum left to bowl over these columns?"

"That ain't all." He pointed across the street. "First he took out those two houses. Lucky nobody was in them."

The residences, almost a block away, were a shambles. Damage, Cunningham judged, couldn't have been more extensive if they had been descended upon by a squadron of tanks.

"One car did *that?*"

The officer shrugged—a confirmative gesture that also conveyed his skepticism.

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At the entrance to the museum, Cunningham was met by a disconcerted Miss Torrence. "Isn't it horrible? And you ought to see what it did to Display Room C—knocked most of the exhibits off their racks."

She followed as he started in.

"But C's on the other side of the building. Have you checked A yet? Must be a mess."

"No, everything's in order there."

A worrisome frown marred the even flow of her features. And it was evident that her distress stemmed from more than just the damage to the museum. At the moment, though, he wasn't particularly interested in her personal reaction.

On the balcony overlooking the cluttered sweep of Display Room C, he gripped the railing and regarded the confusing scene below.

Three suits of armor had fallen from their stands. An entire row of Civil War rifles had been shaken from their racks and lay on the floor. Jolted half off its counter, the sword display case rested on the shards of its own glass faces. Two ancient electric automobiles, originally exhibited facing each other, were now pointed in the same direction.

CUNNINGHAM descended the stairs and, perplexed, walked amid the disorder.

"I don't see," the girl said stubbornly, "how one automobile out of control could do this."

He had been thinking the same thing. "Not when it hit the *other* wing of the building," he reiterated.

"That's not what I mean. Look at all these things that were shaken out of place."

He glanced around.

"Don't you see?" she went on. "They're *all* made of *metal.* None of the things without metal in them have been disturbed—the sarcophagus, mastodon skeleton, those Indian figures, the stuffed animals—"

He looked more closely and recognized something that had escaped her attention. Then he caught her hand, stepped around the sword case and led her over to a spot where scores of pistols, dislodged from their wall racks, were strewn on the floor.

"Look at this," he said, motioning downward. "All these guns are pointed *in the same direction!*" He glanced behind him. "The swords too."

Mounting the stairs again, they surveyed the room from above.

"Don't you see it now?" he urged.

"What?" She asked.

"The way all these things are lying—it forms a pattern. See? They're all pointing in a circle—clockwise."

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The girl tightened her grip on his hand. "No. *Two* circles. One clockwise. the other, the other way. One on this side of the room; one on the other."

She was right, he immediately saw. "Whatever happened here certainly didn't have anything to do with that automobile."

But Peg Torrence had a firm purchase on the rail and was leaning out over the room to study the scene below. "In the very center of this nearest circle—"

"Kutenmaden. And the mastodon skeleton almost in the center of the other."

Then he laughed. "You're not suggesting we waited too long to send Mr. K to the basement, Peg?"

"No, of course not. But—I don't like what's happened. And somehow I keep thinking about that kid with the radio."

"Yes?"

"No boy his size could have hurled a radio as far as he did—and with that amount of force."

He added for his own benefit: Not any more than an automobile, even at top speed, could have demolished two big homes then gone on for almost a block to bowl over a pair of stout Grecian columns.

COMMANDER Chvraul critically eyed the volunteers assembled in the ready room. Sorry lot for a surface detail, he judged. Not a veteran among them.

But then, again, a man with experience in anti-EGMite operations was a little too much to hope for when you put it on a voluntary basis. On the other hand, though, there was something to be said for inexperience. It didn't carry along the reluctance, the uncertainty, that extra measure of self-concern that was always typical of the patrolman who had once before faced an EGMite.

"A pretty shabby crew," Chvraul telepathed, not wholly facetious. "But I guess you'll do, since I don't intend to land by myself. Now for a few details.

"First, we'll need suits. There's no methane down there. Second, when you draw your gear make certain you get a null-emanation generator. We don't want to set off any panic among the natives in the first place and, in the second, we can't waste time going through the formalities of contact."

Penork asked, "What about armament?"

Chvraul had known Penork would be one of the volunteers—an eager recruit, anxious for his first chance at heroism.

"I was getting around to that," the commander disclosed. "Make sure the weapon compartment of each suit is equipped with a Mark VII GM-flux distender which, as you've been told, is the only gun

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effective against an EGMite."

He added a caustic afterthought: "If you can ever get close enough to use it."

"But I thought—" Penork began.

"You thought you could just sneak up on target, squeeze the activator and go collect your medal. Well, it's not *that* simple. You can't attack without intent. The intent to attack is hostility. Hostility is a mental attitude. Mental attitudes are brain wave variations. Hostility is a particular brain wave conformation. EGMites are not telepaths, since it isn't even certain they have a brain. But they are completely aware of every E-type manifestation in their vicinity—even neuro-electrical ones. And they instinctively recognize and respond violently to the hostility pattern. Sure, you could sneak up on one and take a point-blank shot at it —*if you didn't have a brain.*"

Penork didn't seem quite as eager as he had been only a few moments earlier.

An ominous shudder ran through the ship. The lights blinked off and on and a distant generator whined against the sudden load shift. The craft lurched and the deck shifted out from under Chvraul's feet. He went down and found himself entangled with his half dozen sprawled volunteers.

"It's spotted us!" Zauvex's frantic communicative thought burst in on the commander's already considerable apprehension.

THE bulkheads sparked with static charges of E-component and a rivulet of electrical flame leaped along the length of the high-tension lead strung overhead.

Chvraul regained his feet. "We got away with that two-thirty GM attack longer than I thought we would. Quick—turn it off!"

The ship lurched in the other direction and the commander was flattened against the overhead that came down to meet him. This time a crushing G-force pinned him there helplessly while electrical flame hissed all around.

He tried to move, but couldn't —not with the craft accelerating as fiercely as it was. He could only lay there entertaining the mental image of seven hateful repulsor cups, all vibrating at the end of their writhing tentacles as they mastered the basic unified force, warping that energy to its malevolent purpose.

"GM generator off!" Zauvex finally reported. And his mental exhaustion, betrayed by the weakness of his thought, only hinted at the physical battle he must have fought to reach the switch.

Eventually the acceleration died down and, as the ship's nor-

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mal gravity level reasserted itself, Chvraul and the others dropped back to the deck. Sudden cessation of the GM waveform had suggested to the EGMite, the commander reasoned, that it had successfully dealt with the source of disturbance.

He rose, steadied himself and waited until his breathing came under control.

"All right, men," he telepathed to the entire complement. "We'll have to change tactics. Zauvex, punch the computers for an equatorial orbit just outside the atmosphere. After we repair whatever damage we've suffered we'll make one sweep over the target area and hit that thing with all we've got—two-thirty GM waveform at triple amplification. Maybe that'll paralyze it—for a while at least. At the same time we'll try to slip surfaceward on a G-sled. Ten degrees is a large area to search. But maybe we'll find the thing in time."

THE warmth and gratification of victory, the EGMite so assured itself as it brimmed with self-satisfaction, was almost as tentacle-tingling as the ecstasies of sporing would surely be.

Once it had carefully analyzed the fringe region of the EGM field, it had had no difficulty locating the source of its great harassment.

Then—*pfzzt!*

Oh, what sensual fulfillment! What subsequent comfort!

Gone was the shattering regularity of that vicious GM phasing. Gone was the fear, the uncertainty.

And now, after its period of rest and recharging, the EGMite found itself throbbing happily to the inward surge of illimitable energy from the unified field. Now it was absorbing more E-, G- and M-component than it had even guessed existed in this vast host mass. It could feel vitality throbbing, growth accelerating throughout its entire being.

Certainly, it must now be going through the very final stage of prematurity. And its development must be all but complete. Hadn't it, only after its most recent awakening, had to abandon its original pore in the ferrous vessel and seek out a more spacious recess?

That particular evidence of imminent maturity brought it wholly and luxuriously in rapport with its life-giving environment—well, almost.

There was still the matter of all those disturbing E-component waveforms contaminating the flux source. And now, with sensitivity so sharpened by the nearness of adulthood, those hurtful distractions were sources of increasing disquiet.

Well, it would take but an imperceptible fraction of its stored

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energy to sweep its surroundings clear of all waveform order.

There! It had almost instantly pinpointed one of the major disturbances—a great, alternating flow that moved along a number of thin strands of metal, held away from the surface by towering structures.

Pfzzt! Pfzzt! Pfzzt! . . .

One by one the towers wilted.

And only because of its action, the EGMite knew, were its surroundings more wholesome, its relaxation less incomplete.

There! It had located an even greater origin of E-distortion, farther away than the one just eliminated. With the impression came the concept of great, symmetrical formations in swift rotation. And, as they spun, they discharged powerful modulations of the E-component that surged wildly into more thin strands of metal.

Pfzzt!

The spinning things spun no more.

Now—here were a few more of the moving objects that generated their own sporadic, minor waveforms. Less severe than the ones just dealt with, but more irritating because they were closer.

Pfzzt! Pfzzt! Pfzzt! . . .

And, just for the exhilaration it would bring—that huge concentration of matter rearing above the surface in the distance. When the time eventually came, the EGMite would have to probe many such configurations in search of ferrous vessels for the cosmic sporing.

But now—

Pfzzt!

AS gruff as he was imposing, the newly appointed chairman of the Carswell Foundation Museum board of directors chewed impatiently on his cigar, hunching forward in the curator's swivel chair and pounding the desk.

"I'd say you have a hell of a nerve getting me out here because you're having trouble keeping your exhibits in their proper places!" Dorfman exclaimed.

"I know how it sounds," Cunningham admitted, shifting in front of the desk. "But there's something going on in Room C that I can't explain and won't be responsible for."

"Well, what am *I* supposed to do about it?"

Cunningham shrugged inadequately. "It ought to be reported to *somebody*. And you're my immediate superior."

Dorfman dislodged the cigar from his mouth, surveyed it deprecatively and relit it. "I didn't see anything wrong there."

"No. We put everything back in order—for the third time today. But every bit of metal—well, you ever see ironfilings around a magnet?"

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"Just who do you want me to call in—the police, the Marines or some medium with a flair for exorcising?"

Cunningham bit down on his tongue. "I wish you'd just—"

"I'm beginning to wonder, Cunningham, about the board's wisdom in picking a curator. A kid comes in here, throws his radio against the wall and you start looking for something supernatural."

"But that boy—"

"Couldn't have thrown it that far," Dorman completed the sentence through compressed lips. "Maybe I couldn't have either. But the radio had straps, didn't it? If I grab it by a strap and start swinging it around my head —like David, lets say—then I can let go and hurl the thing a mile."

"How about five cars going out of control within two blocks of here in the last twenty-four hours? And there are witnesses that say one of them hit a curb and leaped clear over a garage."

Dorfman sprang up, his patience obviously frayed, and struck a pose—fists on the desk, elbows flared outward—that reminded Cunningham of a bulldog.

"ALL RIGHT," the chairman bellowed, "I'll try a few 'how-abouts.' How about a dozen cars going out of control—all over town? How about that wrecked generating plant? How about the main power transmission line with all its twisted towers? How about those six X-ray machines downtown? How about the explosion that tore the top off Holiday Hill with its radar and microwave relay stations? How about the mayor asking for martial law?"

Cunningham raised his hands. "How about them?" he repeated phlegmatically.

"I'll tell you. And my explanation won't have anything to do with weird schemes that deal with the supernatural—"

"I didn't say anything about the supernatural."

"My explanation will be the same as those being offered by responsible authorities here, in the state capital and in Washington: We're the first city to be hit by a new weapon, new tactics in the cold war of nerves—rampant sabotage! They'll strike out at this community this week, another next week, and so on. The country's crawling with enemy agents who are just now being put to full use—that's all."

"And all those automobiles going out of control?"

"The element of confusion. They work it somehow. As a matter of fact—" Dorfman's eyes grew cold with suspicion. "As a matter of fact, I wouldn't be surprised if any number of persons will come up with devious sug-

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gestions, explanations, suspicions to make us not so sure that it *is* sabotage. Right, Cunningham?"

"I—"

Dorfman checked his watch. "I'm a member of the local civil defense authority. With nine-tenths of the city paralyzed, I have much more pressing matters to attend to. I'll keep in mind what you said about Display Room C—for further reference. This theory of mine about diversionary effects will certainly call for full investigation."

A great, rolling rumble shook the museum's foundation.

"God!" cried Dorfman, racing for the door. "There goes another one of those hills! I sure hope to hell that mining company's suspended operations like we told them!"

STANDING before the air lock's transparent outer hatch, Chvraul gathered the other six men in his landing party about him and gestured toward the planetary surface sweeping by below.

"Terminator's coming up now," he observed telepathically. "When we cross over to the day side we'll be above target. Zauvex'll signal us as soon as he jolts that thing with all the GM juice we've got. Then we'll break out the G-sled, kill orbital speed and head downward."

Zauvex, the commander noted, had done a commendable job adjusting orbit on so short a notice. Especially since the EGM-ite attack had knocked out the delicate computing mechanism and all the mathematics had had to be done by hand. Nevertheless, he had correlated orbital perigee with target zenith so precisely that, even now as they approached the drop point, Chvraul could feel the first faint buffetings of atmosphere. When they broke free, he reasoned, they would have to slough off speed immediately or things might get a little hot for the landing party.

From Zauvex came an excited, "I'm cutting loose with the GM generator!"

"Make the beam tight," Chvraul instructed.

Unobtrusively studying his men for any signs of unreasonable anxiety, he reached behind his back and snapped open his suits storage compartment. Gloved fingers came in contact with the sleek form of his Mark VII GM-flux distender and the feel of the weapon restored a measure of confidence and hope that had eluded him ever since he had realized this might well be his last mission with the patrol.

But he rejected the fatalistic thought and busied himself checking his helmet seal.

In the next instant, all was chaos.

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The ship shuddered and groaned, creaking and snapping rivets from stem to stern.

Lumarian forms in the air lock, flailing helplessly, crashed against one another and pounded the bulkheads like *gaunk* seeds in a dried-out husk. Metal surfaces swapped electrical discharges with one another until Chvraul found it impossible to keep his eyes open on the painfully dazzling sight.

THE AIR lock's transparent outer hatch, together with the bulkhead that framed it, swam up and rammed viciously against the seven Lumarians, flattening them upon its surface with the crushing force of phenomenal acceleration.

Then the hatch ruptured and Chvraul found himself being squeezed through and hurled into space where he went spinning head over heels away from the ship.

As he completed his first rotation he saw the other six volunteers jammed in the ruptured air lock—so securely that not even twice the amount of acceleration would shove them through.

Another cartwheel and he watched the entire ship, its null-emanation shield now obviously shattered, fluorescing blindingly until the very brilliance of the thing hurt his eyes.

By the time he had spun around again, the ship was no more. In its place were thousands of bits of wreckage, each sparking angrily and licking at the others with tongues of liquid flame as the fragmented masses dispersed in all directions.

"Penork!" the commander screamed mentally. "Zauvex!"

There were no answers.

Only the profound silence of space hurled his own desperate thoughts back at him as he hurtled away from the shimmering surface below.

The destruction the EGMite had dealt out having now been completed, the creature had obviously withdrawn its attention.

And Chvraul wondered, as the stars churned unconcernedly all about him, whether the thing was aware there had been a survivor. Perhaps it was. Perhaps it was even gloating over the fate that awaited its final enemy.

For with orbital speed completely checked by the EGMite's attack, the commander knew he would hurtle outward until the inexorable embrace of planitary gravity retrieved him and brought him spearing down, meteorlike, to a swift death of incandescence in the atmosphere.

IF the EGMite felt not quite as elated over its recent total victory as it had over the previous partial one, that was understandable.

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Only conquest was to be expected. In all its ancestral recollections there was not one instance of defeat. Each EGMite was, in itself, living testimonial to the invincibility of its progenitors. If any one of those forebears had suffered the humiliation of defeat, it would not have left descendants to reflect upon the impossibility of failure.

Briefly, the creature studied the unified field on which it was feeding and, along the remote fringe of the EGM flux, detected the hostile neuro-electrical waveform. Destruction, then, had *not* been complete.

But it made little difference. The surviving aggressor, it sensed, was a helpless captive of the G-component. For a moment, the EGMite entertained the impulse to toy derisively with its enemy. But, instead, it was swept up in a tide of delight as it recognized the incipient blossoming sensations of procreation. Already, energy-germ cells were busy spitting seeds into delivery passages and the first of the prespores were squeezing through and finding their way into retention pouches in the repulsor cups, where they would rest until broadcast.

The EGMite, anxious to test its motor ability for the first time, uncoiled and let its fourteen cup-bearing tentacles squirm out of the ferrous pore.

Immobilizing its repulsor cups, it distended a single attractor tentacle and discharged the gentlest burst of negative energy.

There was negligible resistance—a flimsy, crystalline barrier—that shattered immediately. And the creature sensed the minor damage it had done to one of the faces of the symmetrical container that enclosed its receptacle. The rupture was large enough, however, to provide egress into the confines of the greater cube.

IT fastened the focus of another attractor cup on a substantial mass in that larger space and discharged another trickle of G-component. This drew it swiftly toward the anchor object. As the rest of its long, slender trunk was sucked from the pore, it coiled like a spring until it was hardly more than a tight helical form suspended between forward oriented attractors and rearward pointed repulsors.

Joyfully, it drank of the exquisite thrill of locomotion, of feeling the EGM field flow around and through its being as it zipped first in one direction, then in another.

Satisfied now that when broadcast time arrived it would find a way to hurl its spores over the entire surface, the EGMite busied itself with more destruction.

Pfzzt!

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So much for two more of those mobile distractions. It had had to reach far for that pair, though. They seemed to be getting scarce of late.

Pfzzt!

So much for *that* upward projection of the host mass.

And what was this—still another surface bulge? But this one was different, the EGMite discerned from the reflection of its physical pattern against the unified field. It was towering and it was square in horizontal cross-section. It was perfectly ferrous, but the ferrite which it concealed was arranged in a repulsive design of cubs frames within cubes frames.

Pfzzt!

The huge, towering thing, jolted by a full EGM charge, crumpled.

AS you are well aware," Cunningham told the museum staff, assembled in his office the next day, "the governor has called for voluntary evacuation of the city. I imagine it will be compulsory by tomorrow. So I'm temporarily dismissing you. Keep the board advised of your whereabouts and you'll receive your checks regularly."

None of them lost any time leaving.

Cunningham turned his back on the exodus and stared pensively out the window. Down the street a mounted National Guardsman pulled his horse up and unslung a walkie-talkie. Indecision distorted his face, however, and he replaced the device without using it.

The curator wondered whether the soldier's reluctance might not perhaps be due to the fact that little Tommy wasn't the only one to have something happen to him in connection with use of a radio.

Far in the background slumped the wreckage of the Sanderson Building. Cunningham shook his head futilely. Now there had been something *really* inexplicable. It hadn't been an explosion, nor a fire, nor a structural collapse. The skyscraper had just—sagged and crumbled. And if that occurrence could be explained in terms of enemy sabotage, it would have to be admitted that a revolutionary new weapon was involved.

"Since we're both going the same way, we might as well go together."

He started and turned.

"You're leaving too, of course," Peg added unsurely.

"Not yet. But you are—and now."

She only stood there tracing pleats in her starched blouse. "I don't have anywhere else to go."

"I've a relative who lives—"

"No. I'm staying. I'm as certain as you are that this museum has *something* to do with

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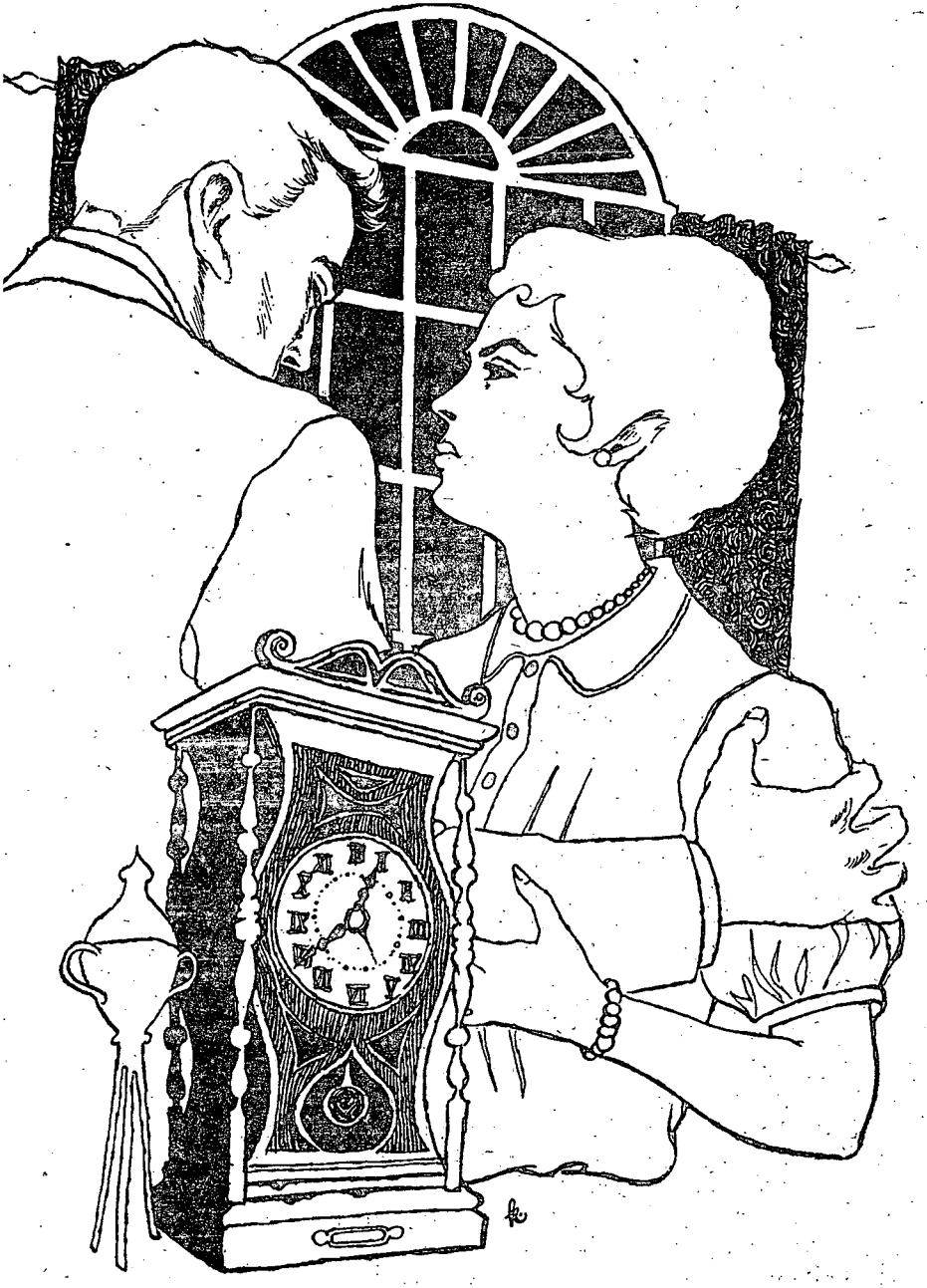

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what's happening out there, even though we might not be able to convince anybody else. And I want to be around when we're proved right."

He crossed over and took her arm, realizing at once that he was vitally interested in having her safely out of the city where simply driving an automobile wouldn't be an almost certain form of suicide.

"Until then," he said, "I want you somewhere else—anywhere else. I'll take care of things around here myself. As soon as you leave I'm going to see the adjutant general again. This time he'll come have a look at Display Room C eve if I have to drag him back."

As he ushered her toward the door she pulled free of his grip. "I've just been thinking about something I learned in high school physics. If you see iron filings arranged in twin circles, you might find the positive and negative poles of the magnet inside those circles. But—"

His face twitched with inspiration. "But if you want to find the *center* of the field, you look *between* the circles!"

She nodded.

He stepped into the hall, paused uncertainly, then sprinted off for Display Room C. Behind him, Peg's spike heels beat a tattoo that reverberated sharply against the vaulted ceiling.

SWEEPING past the Egyptian sarcophagus, he leaped over a curving pattern of Civil War rifles, sidestepped a toppled suit of armor and pulled up abruptly, retracing his steps. He paused, then studied the disorderly yet orderly array of metal objects on the floor.

Peg, who had almost kept up with him, drew to a halt in front of the meteorite display case.

He went back to her. "We're standing just about in the middle of everything now."

"The meteorite case," she observed, "—the glass is broken on this side and—"

There was an audible hitch in her breathing as she stiffened and seized his arm.

"There—there's something in there—in the rock," she said with forced evenness.

He looked more closely. In one of the pores there seemed to be a haphazardly coiled length of red hose, with loop piled on top of loop until it appeared to be one quivering, convolute mass.

Snakes? A nest of them? Red?

He backed off and his heel struck one of the Civil War rifles. He picked it up and, hesitatingly, thrust the barrel through the broken glass surface and into the meteorite pore.

A shudder ran through the red coils and he jerked the weapon back.

One of the loops unwound and

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snaked out of the orifice. On its end, a bell-shaped bulge, flecked on the inside with scores of yellow granules, swayed first in one direction, then the other.

Peg screamed and lurched back.

Suddenly nauseated, he was filled with loathing for the snake-like creature that was now swinging in his direction. He drew back the butt of the rifle to shatter the glass so he could club the thing, whatever it was.

But in the next moment the meteorite case and the girl was spinning violently away as he felt himself hurtling through the air. The sarcophagus flashed by on the periphery of his vision and he tried, but unsuccessfully, to squirm sideways in flight so he could at least brace himself for impact with the wall.

STREWN against the diffuse backdrop of galactic luminescence, the magnificent, cold brilliance of ten thousand stars spun lazily about him as Commander Chvraul threshed frantically to check his gyrations.

The universe finally steadied and he settled into a more or less stable attitude facing the gigantic disc of the world below.

He twisted his head within the confines of his helmet and glanced at the proximeter dial. The reading was less than it had been only moments earlier. He was falling swiftly now. And he wondered over the source of his great calm, his resignation, his almost complete lack of fear.

Perhaps it was because, in his years of EGMite hunting, he had unconsciously come to expect the end would arrive in some such manner as this.

And there it was—less than two planetary diameters away.

But it would be swift.

Odd, how a subtle anesthesia seemed to have crept over him. It was a mental numbness he couldn't explain. And it brought a pleasant indifference to all things. Take now, for instance—he couldn't even remember—nor was he even interested in recalling—whether atmospheric resistance would generate such a G-force that he would black out before frictional heat became unbearable.

His thoughts went, instead, to the doomed populace on that unsuspecting planet below. Other Lumarian patrol craft were on their way. But they could never arrive in time to prevent terrestrial sporing.

They would know what to do, though—what *had* to be done. All the Lumarian ships in existence, multiplied a thousandfold, couldn't in an eternity root out ten thousand EGMites hidden in caves and valleys, oceans and deserts and icy wastelands across an entire world. In dread

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anticipation, he could picture them now—festering, maturing, destroying, cauterizing an entire culture, waiting with vehement impatience for the time when they would again seed the galaxy with their hundred million spores of ruthless devastation.

There was no choice.

If the infected world weren't immediately fragmented, it was statistically certain that at least another, possibly five or six others would be subsequently infested.

Lumaria's patrol, the commander reminded himself wearily, was a cadmium rod. And control rods had to be used, regardless of any other circumstance, whenever the fuel in the pile approached chain reaction.

Chvraul glanced once more at his proximeter. Still falling—accelerating—helpless.

But it made no difference now.

WHEN he had entered the Academy a lifetime ago, he had asked only that there be laid before him the wonders of the galaxy. And he had seen all the magnificent sights, some of them many times over—Tiara Splash, the Maiden's Veil, Corkscrew Vortex, the Black Mouth of Hell, String of Pearls, the Laughing Nebula.

And, oh, the civilizations he had run across. The people—the friendly ones, the warlike ones, the nontelepathic ones, the suspicious ones, the indifferent ones. Yet, among them all, there was not a single species, Lumarianoid or otherwise, that he had not found cause to appreciate.

And there was the basic prerequisite for patrol work—love of life, wherever and however it existed.

Now that it was all over, however, there was no disillusionment, no self-reproach. For, after all, hadn't he killed one EGMite? And who, dedicated to the service and security of greater galactic culture, could ask for more?

Of a sudden he was pressing ponderously against the forward confines of his spacesuit, his face flattened upon the transparent curve of his helmet.

Atmospheric resistance so soon? So smoothly? So far out?

The decelerative force built up until it was pulling at every muscle, constricting main blood vessels, distorting his features, crushing his chest so that he could suck in no more methane.

When he regained consciousness, it wasn't because the force had disappeared—only because it had lessened and was now being applied in the opposite direction.

His proximeter showed a greater reading than before. He was *farther away* from the planet!

His gloved hand flailed into view and he watched the vivid display of static EG charges leap

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from fingertip to fingertip.

The EGMite had *not* forgotten him.

It was trifling with him—like a Lumarian child bouncing a ball.

But it would soon weary of the sport. And, whether death came in atmospheric or stellar incandescence would depend upon whether the creature lost interest at a time when its plaything would be in the planetary or solar G-field.

IF the EGMite had known laughter, it would have made the encompassing, nurturing flux vibrate with uncontrolled mirth. How could its reactions be otherwise when it had its erstwhile, arrogant aggressor pinned out there on the periphery of the field?

Delightfully, the creature brought its seven attractor cups into play, feeling for the precise focal point. This it was not difficult to find—not when an entity enjoyed full kinesthetic empathy with the local unified field.

It discharged briefly—*pfzzt!*—and withdrew the attractors, replacing them with the repulsor organs.

Again—*pfzzt!*

Then another shot of push, and another shot or pull, and so forth.

If the assailant had been in the habit of molesting EGMites, he would surely come to regret his practice before he became incapable of appreciating or regretting anything.

Of course, all of the hostility was gone from the aggressor now. But the EGMite had kept part of its attention directed at the intelligence-thing all along. Such that when the enmity had been replaced by a more subtle neuro-electrical waveform, the creature had still been able to identify its assailant by that new cogitative pattern.

Again, it tasted of vehement pleasure as it pushed and pulled, jostled the intelligence-thing, sent it careening once more to the brink of no-conscious-thought, then lessened the pressure because it knew that when there was no thoughtfulness there was also no pain.

And pain, it had learned to its delectation, made for a most interesting neuro-electrical disorder that it could savor with particular relish.

In the next moment the EGMite sensed a more immediate hostility disturbance. And it diverted but a single tentacle and only part of its attention to the elimination of that grating distraction.

Then it returned to its absorbing play.

CUNNINGHAM shook his head dully, fingered the makeshift bandage Peg had fashioned for

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his lacerated forehead and accepted the cup of water she had drawn from the cooler.

"You've done all you can, Gene," she pleaded. "Let's leave it to them."

She gestured toward the Army colonel and the two uniformed policemen who stood over the couch in the curator's office looking down at him.

"And where it this—this Medusa thing—this meteor?" one of the policemen asked. Flickering light, dancing from the candle on the desk, limned the skepticism of his face.

"We don't have all that much time to waste," the colonel added dubiously. "The adjutant general said we were to *stop by* here. He didn't say to make a night of it."

Cunningham tilted his head to the right. "In Display Room C."

But Peg stepped in front of the colonel before they could stride off. "There isn't *anything* you can do! Don't you understand? Mr. Cunningham almost got killed twice!"

The nearer policeman drew his thirty-eight. "Oh, we'll think of *something* to do, if it's like you say."

Cunningham gained his feet, swayed. "I tried a revolver. But I couldn't even get *inside* Room C with it. That thing caught me in the doorway and hurled me back down the hall." He massaged a sprained shoulder for emphasis.

The colonel raised an eyebrow. "It *hurled* you without even *touching* you?"

The curator nodded. "It's all right if you go in there without anything in particular on your mind. But the second you even *think* of attacking it—that's it!"

"Hogwash!" blurted the Army officer.

"Let's go have a look" one of the policemen proposed, unhooking a flashlight from his belt and bathing the doorway and corridor beyond with a circle of brilliance.

But, instantly, the metal casing of the torch spat out a shower of sparkling radiance. And the beam traced an erratic, twisting path across ceiling, floor and walls as the flashlight left the man's hand and flew against a bookcase. With the *thud,* the room was surrendered back to the twilight of the candle.

"That thing got a short in it?" queried the colonel.

"Guess so," said the officer, waggling a limp hand.

"You didn't have to fling it like *that,*" the other patrolman reproved, straightening after having ducked under the hurtling torch.

"Didn't think I did."

"Then what—"

"Come on," the colonel urged, heading down the corridor. "With

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this much moonlight coming in through those windows, we don't need a flashlight."

Cunningham followed weakly. And, when Peg overtook them down the hall and tried to tug him back, he broke her grip gently and propelled her in the direction she had come.

"No, Gene—don't—"

"Go wait in the office. Better yet—get out of here."

Ahead, the colonel and two policemen, sidearms drawn, were entering Display Room C.

The curator overtook them on the balcony and pointed down over the rail. "There—in that glass case."

"The broken one?" the colonel asked.

But the policemen had already started down.

FOR a moment Cunningham, following, wondered why nothing had happened thus far. But, of course, the others couldn't have aggressive intent in mind—not yet. Not until they saw what was lurking in the meteorite. And, as for himself, the fight had long gone out of him. Now there was only fear—and perhaps curiosity.

The colonel drew up in front of the case and struck a match.

Cunningham lurched as a scream shrilled in his ear, verifying his suspicion that Peg had not returned to the office.

Then, in the unsteady light of the match, he saw the thing.

Reaching out of a fissure in the meteorite, it uncoiled in a slow, sinuous motion, lazily extending its bell-shaped projections, half of which were now thickly coated internally with yellow granules.

The colonel swore and pulled his hand back as the match flame reached his fingers at the same time.

Reflexively, he brought up his revolver. But the weapon, spitting out sparks along the entire length of its barrel, lurched from his hand and flung itself ceilingward. The colonel himself, suddenly doubled over as though in pain, was caught up in a wave of radiant force that dazzled the musty displays in Room C as it sent him crashing against a column.

Both policemen whirled on the meteorite case as Peg's screams resounded in the museum's moonwashed silence.

The nearer officer shouted out coarsely. Vivid force, emanating from one of the creature's bell-shaped organs, had enveloped and was hurling him against a side wall.

But even before he had landed, the second officer was following in the same trajectory. The partition buckled under the vicious impacts. And, as Cunningham raced for the nearer of the three men, he knew none could live.

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PEG, screaming and sobbing hysterically, had backed against a column. Slumping to the floor, she tried unsuccessfully to muffle her outcries.

Cunningham reached the colonel and knelt beside him. But a shattering of glass, punctuated by another terrified cry from the girl, brought him lunging erect and whirling toward the nearest window.

As though riding a shaft of moonlight, an undistinguishable figure emerged from the shower of window pane fragments and drifted, swiftly at first then more slowly, toward the meteorite case. It wasn't until a few seconds had gone by that Cunningham understood the figure had not come crashing in of its own volition but, rather, had been *drawn* in—just as the creature of the meteorite was also able to hurl other objects away.

The captive twisted partly around and Cunningham caught the glint of moonlight on metal surfaces, on the smooth, trans-

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parent sphere that encased the head.

Someone or something in a spacesuit. Not altogether human. Humanoid, at best. The head was huge and hairless while great, curving brow and scalp cast back the moonlight with an almost lustrous reflectivity. Deep, hollow eyes and small, chiseled nose were even more sharply displayed as the face turned fully toward the source of light.

Cunningham watched the spaceman's hand move rearward around the curve of his waist.

Vivid radiance surged from the meteorite creature and engulfed the alien, sending him spinning away and crashing against the wall beside the shattered window.

A section of the body armor snapped open near the spaceman's groping hand and a small, pistol-like object glinted as it dropped to the floor.

But the alien remained pinned against the wall.

AFTER failing in his attempt to use the GM-flux distender, Commander Chvraul lapsed into near stupor, tortured with the pain of broken limbs and torn membranes.

He had taken a brutal beating as a result of the EGMite's attracting and repelling sport. Again and again he had been pounded against the interior of his suit, until only the intermittent relief of unconsciousness had been responsible for his temporary survival.

For some obscure reason—known only to the EGMite mind, if it had one—he had been spared the death of incandescence. Perhaps only long enough to satisfy the thing's curiosity.

And now here he was, held helpless in a strange edifice whose purpose he could not guess—in an alien world thousands of light years from home—in a place that had never heard of Lumaria, or EGMites or interstellar patrol craft.

Nor was there any possible way he could complete his mission, even though he was now face-to-face with the enemy he had so desperately hunted.

Full consciousness returned and he swung his head listlessly toward the terrestrian who was standing there staring blankly at him. Then he glanced at the other native, huddled beside the column and making such disconsolate sounds.

He reached out for their minds and found the first, though barely telecommunicative in a receptive sense, torn and pulled by fear, incredulity. The second was an utter chaos, which was perhaps responsible for the distressful noises she (at least he had been able to establish sex deductively) was making.

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Then Chvraul conceived the beginnings of a desperate plan. But even to entertain it in his thoughts, other than indirectly, would be to radiate the hostility waveform. And that would surely bring immediate, crushing death.

Before he could prevent it, the plan swam clearly in his mind for a moment. And he was surprised that the thought activity didn't bring instant reprisal from the EGMite. For it entailed finding a subtle way to get the EM-flux distender into the terrestrian's hand.

It was only a meager chance. And, at any step along the way, the merest miscalculation would mean total disaster for himself, the native, an entire world—perhaps, eventually, several worlds. But even the flimsiest straw had to be reached for.

CUNNINGHAM backed uncertainly away from the spaceman who was hanging like a picture on the wall. But he paused when, from somewhere within him, came the conviction that he had no cause to fear the—*Lumarian.* And he wondered how that name had wormed its way into his now-grasping thoughts.

But, of course, Lumaria was a star system—close to the center of the galaxy. And this particular Lumarian was the sole survivor of a fighting unit assigned to hunting down and destroying creatures like the one in the meteorite.

ONLY wonder attended the realization that the information imploding into his mind was valid. And, at the same time, came a sense of trust, friendship, fraternity for the manlike being in the spacesuit. No longer did Cunningham fear the alien as he received the impression, somehow, that the other was fatally hurt, but that his suffering was overshadowed by an infinitely more urgent consideration.

Cunningham closed his eyes, swaying against the torrent of communicative thought, of mental images that lashed his conscious.

He saw magnificent sweepts of stellar clusters and nebulae, suns of all colors and sizes, huge black rifts in masses of stars packed so densely that they resembled grains of sand on a beach.

One star grew in size almost with an explosive force and lifted to prominence with it one of the planets in that system. As his attention centered on the world, its surface lunged up at him until he was looking at a continent, then a mountain chain, a valley between two peaks, a meadow in that valley, one particular rock lying on a barren spot in the field. And he understood that

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these subvisual images were being relayed by the helpless captive of the meteorite creature.

THE rock in the field spat out a hideous, tentacled thing identical to the one in the display case. He watched it aim its—"repulsor cups," they were—in all directions and send out a shower of yellow dust that hung there like a cloud for a moment, then surged upward with rocket-like force.

Next, he followed one of the tiny "spores," watching it drift for days before settling to the surface again halfway around the planet. And he saw the resulting "EGMite" grow to maturity while he caught the concept of thousands of such evil things blackening the skies of that imaginary world.

In the next moment they all directed their cups at the surface, churning it, gouging out with explosive force great masses of soil and ore—until the entire ground convulsed and mountains eroded away and plains became pock-marked like the face of the moon.

The visions were coming more swiftly now and Cunningham imagined there was not much time left for the spaceman to complete his narrative.

With an understanding sense of urgency, he watched each EGMite use its "attractors" to throw up a ringlike wall of broken earth, blasting a hole in each fragment and depositing in the recess a single yellow mote from one of its brimming cups.

The account was making sense now. Whatever he saw in the vision was what would happen on earth.

Peg's screams had tapered off and there was only the convulsive sounds of her sobbing. He started over toward her, but paused when more images assailed him.

Now he watched fragments of churned earth, each bearing a single seed, hurtle outward in all directions, flaring briefly as they passed through the atmosphere at incredible speed, accelerating all the time.

Then space and time compressed as he followed one of the EGMite-made "meteors" through endless interstellar reaches, past sparkling clusters, through patches of fluorescing, gas-enriched space—headed fortuitously for a small, bright yellow sun and automatically decelerating as it approached.

The stellar body loomed larger and floated out of his field of pseudovision. It was replaced by a blue-green planet that swam serenely, unsuspectingly through peaceful space. The spore-bearing meteor flared into brilliance as it cleaved air, then dug into the ground with thunderous impact.

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Now the account was over. Now he fully understood.

And he paled at the enormous, cosmic implications.

HE opened his eyes, looked up. The Lumarian was still suspended against the near wall. His head was slumped forward against the curving inner surface of the helmet and Cunningham couldn't be certain there was any life left within that broken form.

Peg had fallen into silence, her eyes staring blankly ahead, her face expressionless. Hysteria had given way to shock and Cunningham, grim-faced and distressed by the extent of the girl's traumatic injury, wasn't certain but what her recent condition was preferable.

The EGMite was slipping out of its fissure, through the broken pane of its display case. And the curator could readily see that its cups would no longer be able to contain the spores it had developed.

The Lumarian stirred, slipped several inches down the wall. But he was immobilized again when the tentacle the creature had kept directed at him became more rigid.

Abruptly, Cunningham felt the distressing pressure of critical urgency and he knew the sensation was being transmitted from the spaceman. Now, he expected, would come the crux of the mental communication. Now he would know the purpose behind the Lumarian's decision to pass on this knowledge.

In his vicarious vision swelled a picture of the object that had dropped from the spacesuit and now lay on the floor.

It *was* a weapon!

It *could* kill, annihilate the EGMite!

One had only to aim it and squeeze the handle and—

But there was a catch.

He *had* been right: Even to *think* of harming the creature would mean immediate, violent reprisal. But he also saw that, regardless of the enormity of the odds against him, he would *have* to try.

THE Lumarian kicked frantically as he was suddenly jerked from the wall and hurled back against it again and again.

Cunningham, aware that the spaceman had paid the final price for his hostile intention, dived for the weapon, hoping the EGMite's preoccupation would give him the chance to reach it.

His hand closed on the gun as the Lumarian, limp and still, was drawn once more, vehemently this time, toward the EGMite.

Cunningham whirled with the weapon.

But a Niagaralike force caught him full in the chest and sent

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the gun flying from his grip. His last impression was that of being hurled violently back toward the stuffed ursine display.

When he regained full consciousness a moment later, he disengaged himself from the now misshapen hulk of a mounted grizzly and tensed for the final EGMite assault.

But none came.

And he saw that the creature, the meteorite, its display case, the Lumarian—all were gone.

In their place was only a smoldering hole in the floor.

Off to one side, Peg stood there wavering, the spaceman's weapon in her hand.

Confounded, Cunningham went over and watched a degree of animation begin reclaiming her features.

Then he understood.

Destroying the EGMite with willful intention was utterly impossible.

But, against the mentally blank background of hysteria and shock, with the sympathetic nervous system directing a subconscious pattern of automatic defensive reflexes, volition was not involved.

Peg finally dropped the gun and glanced uncomprehendingly around her.

He took her arm. "Come on. I guess you've earned yourself a cup of coffee—if we can find one."

THE END

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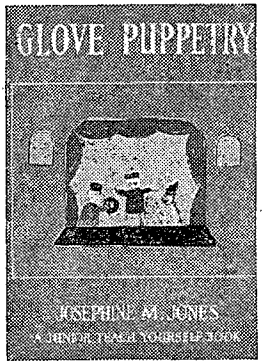

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the LAST FRIDAY in August

By DAVID ELY

Illustrator ADKINS

Every day had always been the same for William until he found a way to turn his hatred for mankind into what he thought of as love.

EVERY afternoon at 5 o'clock, William left the engineering office where he was a senior draftsman and squeezed into an elevator among perfumed secretaries and sweaty clerks—then, on the street, more perspiring bodies, bumping and jostling him, a river of rudely swinging arms and legs and human odors, all flowing in a viscous mass toward the subway entrances, where every thing became inexpressibly worse. In the dancing train, he stood rigid in his clean linen suit, but despite his efforts to remain upright, his body swayed with the joggling motion as if yielding to the command of some diabolical music, and to his disgust, he rubbed arms, legs, buttocks, with his neighbors—especially the shop-girls who sucked their lower lips and wriggled responsively to his unintended tresspasses, who sometimes let their dark little goat eyes rove up and down his slender neatness like fingers, unbuttoning and stroking and naughtily giggling, in violation of his will, as he stared furiously at the advertisements. Oh, how he loathed them, hated them all, the ones who could thus tyrannize over him when he was caught helpless, in this daily vise. And yet, to remain at the office until this horror abated would cut seriously into the time he devoted to the practice of his meditative system.

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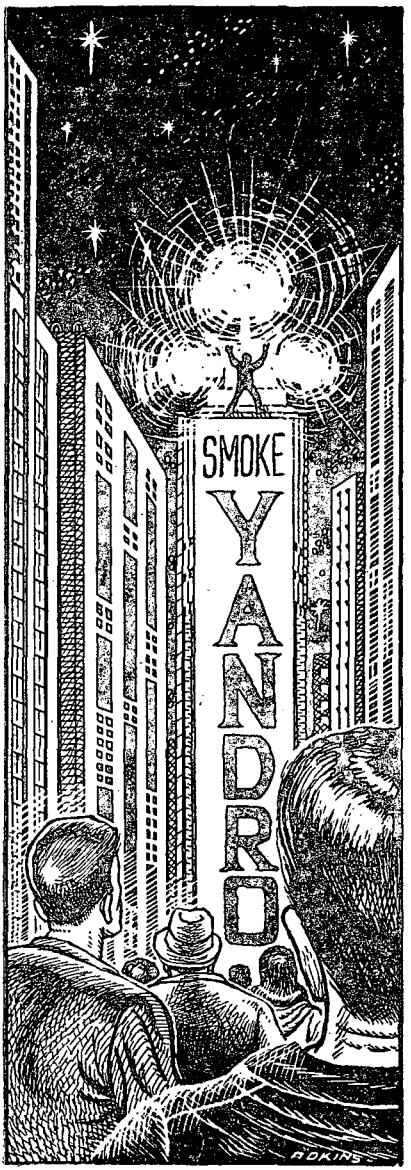

At 5:45, he reached his tiny rooms on the third floor of an apartment building: a living-room, a kitchenette with a dining nook and a bedroom, where William prepared himself for his daily ritual before the three huge matched mirror he had placed so carefully, even to the last fraction of an inch. First, he took off his linen suit and carefully folded it away in the closet. Then he removed the rest of his clothing and, quite naked, squatted down on his heels on the carpet, his arms folded over his chest, his head arched back. Thus he remained. By and by the street noises softened and faded, the rude jolts and thumps within the building itself died away, and William was left in peaceful solitude and quiet. Often he remained poised for hours this way, until he surrendered to a delicious weariness.

. . . .

IT WAS release, release from the racket and noisome pressure of the crowd. The meditations taught William how to achieve tranquility, how to preserve the purity and control of his mind and body, in the midst of the city's chaos. Perhaps they would do even more. William wondered. Would his system not also some day extend its influence beyond his own individual compass? He thought possibly it would; it had done so much for

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him already, surely it could go one step further and help others, too. Still, if others were to be helped, they first would need to be told about the system, to be shown and convinced, to try it out, perhaps—and how was this to be done, if William himself did not play the role of teacher? He recoiled at the thought. It would mean contact with other people, it would mean misunderstanding; ridicule, perhaps even persecution and public denunciation. Then, too, it had taken him twelve long years of patient daily application to his task to reach his present level of mastery. Could he hope to find others who would display a similar devotion? Would there be any at all? And suppose he did find a disciple—a dozen, even—what meaning would this have in the face of the many millions impossible to reach? It was hopeless. He would have to be content with his own salvation.

Yet somehow he knew it would not be so. There would be a way. He could feel a wild excitement stirring in his breast, and a powerful instinctive yearning that raced through his blood and tingled in his fingertips. Something was beginning to happen. A sense of joyful anticipation dizzied him: He was chosen, he was certain of that. He was chosen to lead them, to save them, perhaps by teaching, or by some other means which he could not now fathom. It was not for himself alone that he had so rigorously prepared all these years; this he suddenly understood. He must wait, that was all. It would happen—soon—and he would be ready.

The summer days were oppressively hot. By noontime, the heavy air had borne the carbonaceous stench of the streets to the upper stories of even the tallest buildings. In the shimmering harbor, the ships lay stricken; the water was pressed flat and whitened by the relentless sun. Along the sidewalks, the crowds wandered in sullen exhaustion past doorways that sent forth tiny blasts of chill air and over gratings which oozed soot-laden miasmas. The passengers in the subways grunted in discomfort as each jolt of the trains brought their damp bodies unwillingly together. And yet William did not suffer as he had in summers past, for his excitement was growing, his mind was fixed on the stupendous promise about to be revealed, and he strode lithely, confidently, among the complaining people, toward his hidden goal. Soon he would know. Soon, too, the unsuspecting city would know—and everything would be changed. Instead of heat, there would be coolness; instead of the fierce headlong rush of tangling bodies, there would be peace and

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stillness. Of this, William was certain.

IT HAPPENED on the last Friday in August. All day, William had been aware of great and irrevocable changes coming to pass which subtly charged the heated air with an electrical intensity. He bent over his drafting table, his eyes smarting with the effort of repressing tears of happiness. The lines on the paper seemed to blur and waver. When the telephone rang, he found he could scarcely hear it, for he was eagerly intent on the coming transformation of things and all his senses were straining to capture each tiny signal. From time to time, he would glance around the drafting room. The other men were working at their tilted tables, as always, but sometimes one of them would look up with a puzzled air and peer about anxiously, as if aware of some unseen presence. If his eyes met William's, he would gaze for a moment in a trancelike fixation, unblinking and unknowing; then, with a jerk of his head, he would duck down uneasily, back to his work. All of this William saw.

He also saw, outside, the remarkable flight of the birds: the pigeons and the starlings. Almost with one motion, they flapped and fluttered from their thousand perches on the roofs and ledges; in lazy floating circles, around and around in great flocks, they glided toward the streets, drifting slowly down in unhurried patterns, like November snow, until the late afternoon shadows below hid them from William's view.

Below, too, the street noises, instead of quickening with the approach of the rush hour, began to soften. William could not see the streets, but he sensed what was taking place, and his heart was alive with quiet joy. Out in the harbor also, there was change. The tug boats were churning in toward the piers to rest beside the ships which lay berthed. One by one the boats docked, the last ones hurrying like tardy theater-goers rushing to their seats before an opening curtain. William's eyes swept across the water with exultation. The harbor was empty at last; the clamor of the narrow city streets had diminished to a faint, uneven hum. The city was preparing itself for the event.

The great church clock outside struck five. Each rolling stroke lingered in the stillness; each hollow echo cast down by the bell over the city settled like a soft blanket, an insulating palpable layer of sound, cooling and protective. William did not raise his head as the solemn notes were struck; he did not need to see what his heart had already per-

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ceived. He bowed in prayerful thankfulness. The tolling of the great bell marked the end of what had been before. The triumphant shout of silence that followed was his signal. Now his work would begin. Everyone was waiting.

WILLIAM raised his head. For a moment, he kept his eyes closed, dreamily savoring the prospect of realization. Then he allowed his gaze to rove across the room, so familiar in its thousand details and yet now so wonderfully altered. It was one minute past five, but there was no hurried rush for the doors, no hasty bangings of desks and chairs, no chatter from the secretaries and the youthful draftsmen. Everyone sat patiently in place, looking at William. Every head was turned his way, every pair of eyes was fixed on him. The well-known faces, so placid and expressionless now, suddenly became dear and beloved. William looked at each one in turn, his own eyes dimmed by tears of affection. He rose from his desk humbly, but yet with a secret pride in his heart. He paused, then moved slowly to the outer door, the heads all turning gently to watch. He could not stop to speak to them. He had no time. But as he opened the door and took one last look back, the faces seemed so loving and yet so sad that he could not bear to disappoint them. "Follow," he told them, "follow behind me." And as William entered the corridor, the people in the office rose from their places quietly, and keeping at a respectful distance, filed out after him, silent and orderly.

Now William was on the street. He did not recall coming down in the elevator, and yet he must have descended that way, and the office people likewise, for they were there, behind him, in a patient attentive group, watching him trustfully. Then he noticed that there were more people there, too, from some of the other offices, also silent and watchful, looking at him with rapt, solemn faces.

The great street was still. The vehicles had stopped. Beside them, the drivers and occupants were standing, waiting for William. All up and down the thoroughfare, as far as he could see, it was the same. Everywhere, people were standing, their faces turned his way. In the little restaurants and shops, too, there were motionless clusters of figures near the windows, waiting for William to summon them. He walked up the street, knowing that the people were following, and, as he passed each building entrance where more throngs were waiting to join the procession, the multitude swelled. After a few blocks, William stopped

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and turned around. The people stopped, too. By now, they were so numerous that their ranks spread across the street from sidewalk to sidewalk. And so quietly had these thousands marched, that not even a footstep had been heard. William surveyed them, his eyes moist with emotion, and they looked back at him unwaveringly; and although he was simply standing as they were, in the street, it seemed to him that he was at a considerable height, for he was unmistakably aware, observing that enormous gathering of faces, of each single one. He saw the eyes most particularly; the faces were less important. He could not distinguish between men and women, not because of the distance—the foremost rank stood perhaps only thirty yards behind him—but because he was concentrating on the eyes, the thousands and thousands of eyes that were fixed unblinkingly on his. He longed to speak, for he knew they were waiting to hear him, but it still was not yet time. He had to go forward; others ahead had assembled, too, and they must be permitted to join.

SO WILLIAM resumed his steady pace, and behind him came the massed silent marchers, their numbers growing with every step, as more slipped in from the sides. Overhead, the sun beat down, but it was a cooling sun that imperceptibly chilled the summer air and drew away its dampness. There was no moisture. All was clear, cool, dry, and the still air was free of odor, except for a slight pleasant scent, pure and mild, as of lilies. The birds were hidden and did not sing, and although the street clocks moved their hands, they passed the hours without striking. William walked on, his feet seeming to float over the pavement without sensation, without sound. Along the curbs now, the people ahead had assembled in waiting ranks, only their heads moving as they watched William pass by; then patiently they stood until the crowd approached and it was appropriate for them to enter the march.

Now William reached a huge square in the heart of the city. This was the place. Without hesitation, he walked to one corner where there stood a majestic sign, many stories high, the largest display board in the world, seen by millions of persons every day. As the multitude entered the square and began to fill all the enormous empty space, William began climbing a slender steel ladder that ran up the full height of the sign, to giant floodlights on top, which at night played not only on the sign and the square, but over the entire city as well, and even on the stars in the sky.

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The floodlights, now dim, were fitted into massive frameworks riveted on heavy steel bars running the breadth of the structure and supported by upright posts. In the very center, there was a broken place, evidently the result of a violent storm. There, the crossbar had snapped in two places and the center light had been blown away. But the post remained, holding up a short section of the broken crossbar, which was perhaps five feet above the roof of the sign.

In front of this, then, William would stand. From the top of the sign he would speak to the host assembled in the square. Even now, as he climbed effortlessly ever higher, he knew what he was to say, although the exact words would not occur to him, he realized, until the very moment of utterance. At the top he saw that the moon had risen, full and large, and hovered above near the sun. Both shed a soft light, and seemed alike, as twin stars, for the moon was unusually brilliant while the sun was now oddly subdued, so they appeared the same. They were like two eyes.

HUNDREDS of feet beneath him he could see the square spread out, covered by the thousands, the millions of upturned faces, which glowed under the gentle radiance of the sky like a frozen phosphorescent sea, almost like tiny stars. William now could hardly distinguish between sky and earth, for above and below alike glittered with the countless pricks of light, and only the two huge staring eyes of sun and moon were different; and even as he perceived this, the sun and the moon moved closer, much closer, and the infinite lights all around began to fade and lose their brilliance. William knew then that he had to speak but when he opened his mouth and formed the first words on his tongue, no sound emerged to break the silence, and then, absorbed by the sight of the now swiftly-advancing eyes, he forgot the words entirely. In the intense cold glare, he pressed back against the steel bar. As he did, and felt the torn metal edges bite sharply into the flesh of his hands, he knew at once that he was too far away, too high, for his words to be heard, even if he could have spoken, and at almost the same instant he realized that it was not with words that he would teach them; no, it was to be the other way, and so, sobbing not in pain but in gratitude for this last flash of understanding, he leaned back, back with all his might, against the jagged steel.

THE END

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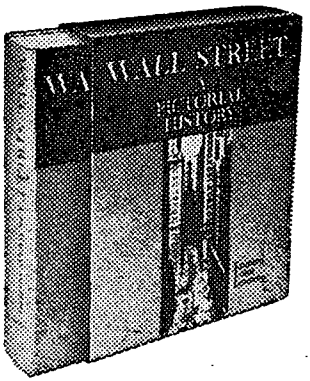

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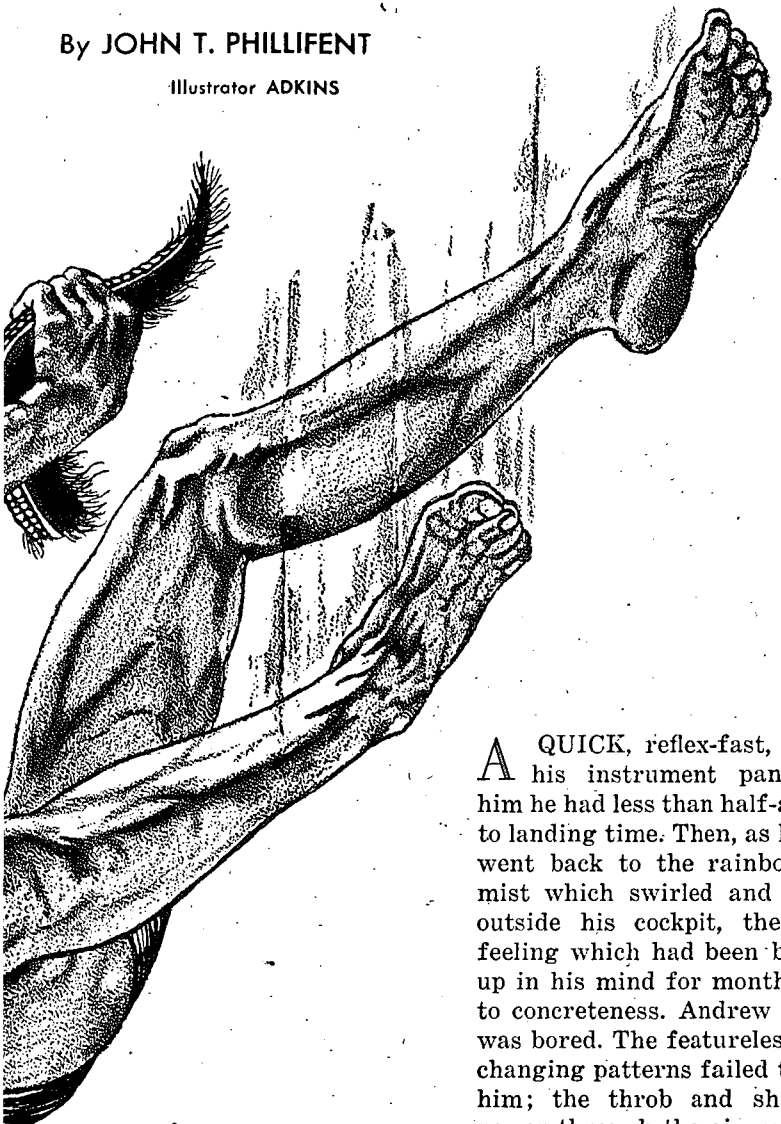
By JOHN T. PHILLIFENT

Illustrator ADKINS



A QUICK, reflex-fast, look at his instrument panel told him he had less than half-an-hour to landing time. Then, as his eyes went back to the rainbow-hued mist which swirled and glowed outside his cockpit, the vague feeling which had been building up in his mind for months came to concreteness. Andrew Quarry was bored. The featureless, ever-changing patterns failed to catch him; the throb and shiver of power through the aircraft were suddenly monotonous; even the sagging, exhausted excitement of the ten men in the cabin at his

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back, failed to stir him into anything more than mild sympathy.

What did they have that was new, anyway? Six weeks ago he had flown these men from Venus Prime to Outbase Three. Now he was bringing them back. They were lean, worn out with the heat and continuous sweating, but looking forward to the comparative ease and comfort of Prime Base. They could work up excitement over the cases, bottles and flasks of new and strange specimens they had found, but that was their function. For ten years now, these men, or men like them, had been nibbling at the secrets of this uncaring planet. First a solid foothold, a glass-and-concrete base, under an umbrella of rot-proof plastic to keep at bay the ever-hungry, spore-laden mist. Then little cautious forays out into the swirling, hot mist, the steam-heated insistent life of the planet. A few hard-earned lessons. A beggarly start, but a start. Then more daring forays, and a sampling technique. Take one radar-equipped aircraft, and sweep out huge circles, until you found a solid place. Mark it with a beacon. Put down there, set up a small base, and cast round for samples and specimens of the flora, the fauna, the soil.

Ten years of it. For the last four, Quarry had been one of two pilots who did their flying for them, in specially designed aircraft and with expensively won methodology. Now, all at once, he was bored with it all. Examining the idea, now that it was out in the open, he corrected it. Not all at once. This feeling had been trying to make itself known for some time, but he had been shoving it away. Boredom was his old enemy, and had chased him all his life. He was unwilling to admit yet another failure. But there was more. Venus had taken a lot of men, and a lot of equipment, in ten years. Not so much viciously as uncaringly. This was a planet with all the life it could hold, already, with neither room nor welcome for any more. It was a place where men broke, unpleasantly. So, he had been afraid of admitting to fear.

He grinned, thinly, at his faint reflection in the cockpit-cover. It was getting to be something when Andy Quarry gave more than half a damn what anybody else thought about him. If they wanted to call him 'chicken' that was their privilege. He was through, bored stiff. Accepting that, at last, relieved the unsettled pressure he had been feeling, and he went forward with the idea. Do it now. As soon as they were down he would seek out M'Grath, and demand his release, and the hell with it.

A WARNING red winked on his board and he withdrew

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his vacant gaze from the multicolored streamers outside, gave his attention to his controls. The polar beacon signal was strong, now. Venus Prime sat right on top of the planet's pole, at its coolest point. Directly overhead, about a thousand miles up, the orbital satellite hung, and the radio-link between it and base was the only certain marker in the mist. Vane-motors purred as he adjusted the aspect of his craft ready for the tail-first sit-down. The auto-pilot could have done it alone, but four years of experience had made him cautious of instruments. Every cubic inch of that air out there was crammed with microscopic fungal spores, and there was no way of keeping them out for very long. You sealed everything up tight, you dipped every possible instrument in fast-drying inert plastic, and, if you were lucky, you could count on a working life of six seeks. For safety, you ran a duplicate, just in case. He began taking the craft down. The mist, below, thinned suddenly, showing a dirty dark-green patch. Somehow, Venus vegetation managed to get a foothold even on this sheet of glass-faced concrete, in between landing times, but a regular bath of ultra-violet kept it wilted. With the ease of long practice, he set the craft down on its tail, cut the howling turbines, killed the contra-grav, and sat back. So much for that. In a moment, he would climb out and find M'Grath. He looked out and down, staring at those below.

Here, in the coolest spot on the whole planet, it was warm and humid enough to make clothing a matter of whim. Shorts and shoes, for the most part. But the shapes which showed through the mist, to help with the crates and the returning team . . . they were dressed to kill. Only once before had he seen so many buttoned-up shirts and collars. The memory made him frown. Still, it wasn't any of his concern, now. He got up, stiffly, went through the door at his back, down through the cabin, and out into the warm wetness. A shape detached itself from the crowd around the returned team, came close, and proved to be M'Grath. Psychiatrist, father-confessor and maintainer of internal concord, M'Grath was short, fat and balding, with a permanent 'I knew this was going to happen' expression.

"I want you, Andy" he said, abruptly. "Come on, over to Admin. with me, right away, will you?" Quarry fell into step alongside him, curiously.

"Mind-reading?" he asked, and M'Grath looked up, puzzled. "I mean, how did you know that I was coming to see you anyway?"

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"I didn't. Were you, and why?"

"Just to hand in my resignation, that's all. I'm all through, here" he sniffed, appreciatively, at the relatively clean air which struck him as they went through the double gate of the dome air-lock. Here, inside the dome, the air had faint rainbow tints, a reminder that the spores were still present, although fewer.

"You heard me?" he asked. "I'm quitting."

"I heard" MGrath grunted. "It can wait. There are more urgent things. As you will have guessed, we have visitors. They didn't come to see you, naturally, but they are going to see you, just the same. A most peculiar situation. I can't handle it, at all. You're my last hope."

"Me? I'm no public-relations man. Besides, I don't like politicians."

"It's not a congressional committee, this time." M'Grath sounded as if he would have been more pleased if it had. "Not that, at all. Quite different."

QUARRY was intrigued, but knew M'Grath well enough to let him say what he had to in his own way.

"My job . . ." M'Grath muttered ". . . is to know what goes on inside people. I know every man here. Takes a certain type, to survive. Unbalanced, one-track mind, you might say. Somebody who can devote himself to one thing, and make it fill his whole life. Now, such a person is completely at a loss when dealing with the unexpected."

"That's where you come in."

"That is where I am supposed to come in, yes," M'Grath grunted. "But there are limits. Times when I am forced to make a shot in the dark. Andy, when I ran the rule over you, for service here, I recall thinking to myself . . . if ever there was such a thing as a one hundred percent sane person, you're it. Which makes you just about as abnormal as you can get, but let that pass. Right now, I need some solid sanity. You'll see, in a moment." They had reached the door of the Administration building, and suddenly, Quarry was curious as to what lay on the other side of the conference-room door. M'Grath had never broken down like this before.

The room was crowded. He recognized those on the right side of the table: Dr. Richter, Chief of Administration, Venus Prime, flanked by four equally familiar faces, one from each section . . . flora, fauna, geology, meteorology. It looked like a massed attack, Or defense, maybe? Their faces were grim. He swung his glance to the left, and wished he had been given time to put on a shirt. His first two impressions were of numbers, and sex. Nine

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people, and two of them were women. The only women on Venus, he thought, irrelevantly. M'Grath did the introductions, swiftly and smoothly.

"Miss Maria Taliafiero . . . you've heard of, I'm sure . . ." Quarry nodded, and masked his unbelief by habit. The notorious dramatape star looked up at him from her negligent sprawl, her eyes masked and meaningless under dark glasses. "Miss Rogers . . . secretary-companion-maid. M. Raoul Cardan. Watney Graves. Dan Gilmore. Hector Cortayne. The Reverend Julius Malt. Lieutenant Downey . . . and Sergeant Brand." Quarry could identify some of them at a glance. Cardan, a gaunt, imperious beak-nosed patriarch of a man, noted for his daring, off-trail epics. Cortayne, six-foot six of beautiful beef and pseudo-menace. Watney Graves, a dressed-up dreg of humanity, with a face that had seen everything and had not been impressed. Gilmore, camera-man, maybe. The Reverend and the two soldiers were completely unfamiliar to Quarry. He looked to M'Grath, and the psychologist shook his head, gestured to Richter. Quarry followed.

"You will have gathered that they are here to make a dramatape," M'Grath muttered. "At least, the background for one . . ."

"They must be raving mad. How the hell did they get as far as this?"

"That is the whole trouble," Richter put in, angrily. "This Cardan, he has influential friends in Space Research office. He has documents, signatures, which credit him as assistant research, require my co-operation. I am supposed to throw all our resources into this project . . . this fantasy of dramatape entertainment."

"Sounds as if you've refused."

"Naturally. Damn it, you know this is serious science, and dangerous, too. The staff, and myself, absolutely refuse to be associated with a 'movie' of any kind. We will not be responsible for this man, nor his party. We do not want them here, where they are nothing but an embarrassment. I have told them all this, but they refuse to leave."

"Somehow . . ." M'Grath took up the thread, "they have to be talked out of it, and soon. If they don't signal, and catch the shuttle-ship they'll be stuck here six weeks, until the next one. That mustn't happen."

"How about Johnny Lomax?" Quarry asked, thinking of his opposite number.

"Don't be ridiculous," M'Grath snorted. "You know Lomax is a moron, apart from being able to fly a plane. They wouldn't listen to him."

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"Wasn't thinking of that. I wondered if he'd mind checking over my craft, just in case I have to fly this bunch wherever they want to go."

"You can't be serious, Andy?" M'Grath looked aghast. "We want them away from the planet, altogether."

"I know what you want. Now let's go see what they want, eh? And you just listen." He swung around, and headed for Cardan, with M'Grath following.

M. CARDAN" he said. "I understand you have some idea of making a dramatape here. That right?"

"Hah!" Cardan brushed the air aside. "Talk, and more talk. I wish for action. Who are you? Do you have influence with Dr. Richter?"

"I'm the pilot who will have to fly you and your crowd, if you're going anywhere."

"Good. You are co-operative. You will be well-paid, more than now . . ."

"You can hold it, right there," Quarry interrupted. "Your money doesn't buy me. I fly because I like it. I'm here because I like it. I'm the guy in the middle, strictly. Not a scientist, nor a technologist. This base is full of both. I'm neither. Strictly neutral, right? And curious. Just how much do you know about conditions, here?"

"So it is rough, and tough, and rugged," Cardan said, excitedly. "I have heard this. But I am Raoul Cardan. I make pictures where no-one else has been yet. On the high mountain. In the jungle. In the air. In space. On the Moon, and Mars . . . but that was not so good. It had been spoiled, long before, you understand? But this is Venus. It is mystery, the unknown, the exotic. It is new. So I will make a picture here."

"Unknown is right," Quarry nodded. "I wonder if you realize just how much. If you added together all the surveyed area of Venus, you'd have a piece about the size of Manhattan Island, maybe. The rest is a total blank."

"So little, in ten years? Then my picture will help . . . we will learn much, is it not so?" Quarry killed a shrug, tried a new tack.

"You any idea what it's like, outside?" he demanded. "Don't get wrong ideas, from this bit here. This is cool, and civilized, after a fashion. Out there it's jungle, and jungle like nobody ever saw before."

"It is nothing!" Cardan brushed that aside, too. "I have made jungle epics before, many times. Borneo, New Guinea, the Amazon . . . all impossible, before I did it. I have my methods, my experts," he chucked a nod back to the two soldiers.

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Lieutenant Downey leaned forward with a hard grin.

"Volunteers, Mr. Quarry," he said. "Sergeant Brand and myself are U.N. Jungle Squad. Specially seconded to M. Cardan. We've done this kind of thing before. I think our kit and experience will cope with anything we're likely to find here."

Watney Graves spoke up, in a jaundiced whine that suited him. "What's all the hassle about, anyway?" he wondered. "It's not as if we were going to live on the job. Three-four weeks, is all."

"You can't make a dramatape in that time," Quarry said, positively, and Graves sniggered.

"Who's the expert, now?" he jibed. "But, all right, we can't. All we're after is a few thousand feet of genuine stuff, backgrounds, scenery, the real thing. We can mock-up the rest, on the lot, so close you'd never know the difference."

"Fake it, you mean?" and Graves held up a limply protesting hand.

"That's a bad word. We can duplicate anything so it's real. With the genuine article to go by. What's wrong with that?"

"All right," Quarry considered a moment. "You want three or four weeks in an outbase, to get some shots of Venus in the raw. And that's all?"

"It is not all!" Cardan broke in, furiously. "I have taken much trouble, spent much money. I have a name, a reputation. This picture must carry the mark by which I am known . . . real, authentic. Nothing cheap. I ask for co-operation, from your scientists. Advice. And they refuse. They tell me to go home. Me!"

"That's natural, too" Quarry said, gently. "These men are all the experts there are, on Venus. They've told you to go home. You've *had* your advice, and rejected it. So I'll tell you what we'll do. Dr. Richter will make out a disclaimer, and you'll sign it, which will absolve him of all responsibility for you and your party. Also a formal transfer of responsibility for me and the aircraft, to you. Then you will be completely on your own, and I'll fly you anywhere you want to go, and bring you back . . . and it will be nothing to do with them, at all. How about that?"

The director shrugged. "Very well. I am willing for this. You will enter my employ . . ."

"I told you to forget that bit," Quarry said, flatly. "Nobody buys me. I'm going along with this because I'm curious to see just how far a damn fool has to go before he'll admit to being wrong."

M'GRATH tugged at his arm, drew him back across the room to where Richter was watching, and listening.

"I don't like the idea of a dis-

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claimer," the Administration chief mumbled. "It settles the question of responsibility, of course. But suppose they do the impossible, and come back with something spectacular, something new? We'll look fools, too." Quarry grinned, rubbed his nose.

"It's not likely," he said, softly. "You know what it's like out there. I reckon they'll have had a gutful inside a couple of weeks. And even if they do something fantastic, and get some good pictures, so what? You'll have to climb down and be nice to the man, that's all. You've done it before."

He stood back while the scientists put their heads together, with M'Grath, and argued. This aspect of scientific expertise always baffled him, this inability to make a decision without committee work. Then M'Grath turned and hooked Cardan into the discussion with a finger. Quarry strolled across, took the director's seat, between Watney Graves and the lounging Taliafiero.

"You have a story-line to this picture?" he asked, curiously.

"Of a kind," Graves nodded. "Just provisional. We'll rewrite it as we go. That's my job. You know, I don't get your big-domes. This could be a big thing, for them. Can't you see the credit-titles . . . 'Made with the co-operation of the gallant and dedicated band of researchers of Venus Prime!' Who ever heard of Venus Prime, outside a few scientific societies? But by the time we load our epic on to the etherlines, the whole world will know. As for the story . . . well, that's pure corn, of course. Vox populi, after all. Gallant band of scientists . . . outbase . . . cut off, no radio-link, no communication. Right, so far?"

"True," Quarry nodded. "We have a highly eccentric ionosphere, and weird atmospheric conditions. We can get a beacon-signal through, most of the time, but that's all. You must have been looking it up?"

"Research, in my own little way. All right, now something goes wrong, at the base, and they're in trouble. Nothing for it but they must make a forced march, through the jungle, back to Prime. And there's your first-level theme. Simple and dramatic. Struggle, danger, heroism, against a jungle background."

"What sort of a march did you have in mind?" Quarry asked, innocently.

"Nothing definite," Graves shrugged. "Say . . . a hundred miles?" Quarry heard the derisive snorts from across the room.

"You stopped your researching a bit too soon. Nobody . . . but nobody . . . has been further than five miles away from a base, on foot, anywhere on Venus. Not and come back to tell."

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"Five miles!". Graves was shocked out of his casualness. "Why not?"

"Because, in the heat, the humidity, and other things, by the time you've gone five miles on foot, you've done a day's work. You're ready to sit down and rest. And there are no resting-places. Not here. This planet is alive, and on the jump, all the time. Even here." He looked past Graves to Gilmore, to the shiny straps across his chest.

"Cameraman?"

"Right!" Gilmore nodded. "Without me, nothing."

"Without your cameras, you mean. Are they protected?"

"You bet," Gilmore winked. "I've been on jungle projects before, mister. This job is sealed tighter than Fort Knox," and he shrugged the strap round, flipped the cover on a piece of equipment he obviously prized above rubies. "Any light," he said, reverently, "any range, full stereo, full color, stereo-sound, six mike inputs, completely self-contained and primed for two hours register without changing a thing. Saves having to open up, out in the open. And this is one of six."

"Very nice." Quarry said, heartily. "A pity it will be just so much junk inside twenty four hours, along with all the rest."

"Huh?" Gilmore stared at his prize. "But it's sealed. It's airtight!"

QUARRY explained. "We carry more than a hundred tech men who do nothing else but strip, clean and sterilize instruments and machinery . . . and there is no one hundred percent perfect way of sealing anything, not here. But they do know a few crafty ways of delaying rot. It'd pay you to go see them, get some advice. Else that gadget will be just so much dead weight inside a few hours."

Quarry turned to Graves once more. "Where do the women come into it? We have no women, on Venus, so you can't have a woman scientist, or a girl-friend . . . not and be authentic."

"Make way for the corn," Graves chuckled. "We're selling this to the public, remember? They expect fantasy, dream-stuff. What sort of a thrill is a woman-scientist? No sir, that's no good. Our provisional title is 'Venus Queen', and guess who is billed for the lead!"

Quarry groaned. "Don't tell me you're going to discover natives . . . not that old thing?"

"Why not?" Graves was unashamed. "You said, yourself, that ninety-nine per cent of the planet is unknown ground. So you don't know. *They* don't know."

"Fair enough. I'm no scientist. I only know what I hear, which is that there are no signs of any placental stage among the life-forms so far discovered. Prob-

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ably due to the heat, and the dominance of fungoidal forms. But they could be wrong, I guess. So our heroes trek through the jungle, and discover a tribe of Venusians. Ugly and monstrous, of course. The men, anyway . . . ?"

"You're getting it," Graves sniggered. "The men are beasts. The women are gorgeous, by implication, anyway. Tally will be the only one to count. She falls for Hector, naturally, by comparison with her own people. And there's your second-level conflict. Beauty in the wild. The rest is as inevitable as Greek drama. What does he do? Does he rescue her, take her back to civilization? Does he reject her, knowing it would never work out. Or does he reject the evil wickedness of our civilization to stay with her in this primitive, unspoiled world? Sort of Garden of Eden touch, there. We haven't figured out all the angles, yet. In fact, that's why we have the padre along, to advise on the religious undertones."

THE Reverend Malt had been following all this in birdlike attentive silence. He smiled now, and spoke, quickly, almost breathlessly.

"I am grateful for this chance, not just to advise on spiritual matters, but to be able to see God's handiwork in its unspoiled state. I am sure the experience will enlighten my view of our troubled civilization."

"If you're looking for that place where the hand of man has never set foot," Quarry smiled, and Malt managed to smile, too. "This is it, all right. But as for it being God's handiwork, that's your department. One thing is sure. Whoever did design this place never had us in mind." Cardan came stalking across, to tap Quarry on the shoulder, a thing he hated.

"It arranges itself," the director said, briskly. "When can we leave?"

"About seven hours," Quarry answered. "I need to catch a meal and some sleep. Then I'll be ready."

He had got as far as the door when M'Grath intercepted him, caught his arm.

"What's gotten into you, Andy?" he puffed. "You don't give a damn, I know that. But, Andy, you may not value yourself very highly . . . as is your privilege . . . but there are those who do. Me, for one. So don't do anything too damn foolish, will you?"

QUARRY was still revolving that strange statement in his mind as he walked out to his plane, seven hours later. It was the last thing he would ever have expected from M'Grath, who was notorious for not caring about

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personal involvements . . . who had no friends, and took pride in declaring it. Birds of a feather, Quarry mused. Then he came up to Downey and Brand, who stood by the plane's gangway.

"All loaded up?" he queried, and Downey nodded, gestured to the aircraft.

"Queer-looking craft," he commented. "I don't recall ever seeing anything like it before. Can't see how the hell it flies, frankly."

"Coleopter," Quarry said, briefly. "A ring-wing. Old idea. Never caught on to any great extent, but it's the only thing that will take-off straight up and function in this atmosphere. Slow, but you can't break any records in this soup. And it's stable." Downey nodded, waved at the mist.

"Sure is thick, all right. What I was wondering, just how much lift do you have? We put a lot of heavy stuff in there," he shrugged a shoulder at the hold. "There's a power-truck, for one thing, weighs just over a ton."

"A ton!" Quarry said, thickly, and turned, to go up the ramp and peer down into the hold. It was crammed, but the rest of the gear looked light enough. He went back down, thoughtfully, and looked at Downey.

"I reckon we can lift off with that lot, all right," he said, grimly, "but it will crowd my safety-margin a bit. What the hell do you want a power-truck for, anyway?"

"General work-horse, hauler, power-supply for lights, equipment, carry stores, weapons . . . and it's submersible, too. Wouldn't be without it. We like to work on a fair safety margin, too, you know."

"All right," Quarry shrugged. "The contra-grav will take the sting out of it, I reckon, and we won't be bringing it back, anyway."

"What d'you mean by that?" Downey put his jaw out. "We don't lose any of our stuff, if we can help it. It cost too much."

"It won't be worth a nickel, inside a week," Quarry told him, flatly. "You heard what I told the cameraman. Goes for your stuff, too. Anyway, Cardan prints his own money, doesn't he? He can always get more . . ." he broke off as figures began to show, through the mist. The rest of the party he could see by their attire that already they were making concessions to the heat. Quarry suppressed a sneer, wondering how long this would last. For this was the 'cool'.

"We go, now, yes?" Cardan demanded, and Quarry shrugged.

"Just as soon as I run up the engines, yes," Cardan went up the ramp, and into the cabin. Quarry looked at Downey, thoughtfully.

"Do me a favor," he said.

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"Check that truck. Make sure it's lashed down tight. As soon as we get altitude I shall be turning into level flight. I don't want that damn thing walking about, back there." He went up the ramp, into the cabin, and up the floor, which was vertical, now. Automatically, he noted that they had had the sense to space themselves evenly either side of the center line. It helped on half of his mind to argue that these people knew what they were up to, in part, anyway. The other half of his mind kept insisting that they were as crazy as all 'artists', and that he ought to wash his hands of the whole business.

IN HIS own cabin he went through pre-take-off routine automatically. He held down the contra-grav starter while it rattled over critical into a smooth hum, then watched it come to rest . . . at fifty-three percent. He jolted the gauge with the heel of his hand, unbelievingly, then grinned at his own folly. It was still set for his original load. He wound the adjustment up, and up, and saw the register following, past thirty . . . twenty-five . . . twenty . . . and there it stuck. The vernier was hard over. There you are, said gloom. There goes your safety margin. Chuck it, now, while you have the chance. Quitting time, Andy. And then he recalled, with a start, the idea that had dominated his mind, the last time he'd sat at these controls. He was going to find M'Grath, and serve in his quit notice, wasn't he? What had happened to that bright idea?

He'd been bored, hadn't he? And now . . . ?

"The hell with it," he muttered, out loud, and took hold of the throttle-grips, "No point in backing out, now," and the power-hum deepened. They were off the deck, and climbing. Within ten seconds they were wrapped in rainbow mist, and alone. Feeling the strange sluggishness of his controls, he eased round, watching the beacon-reader, the 'point'. The left-right needles were down, but trying to lift to the impulses from the Prime beacon right at his back. Then he was getting the fainter signal from Base One, and the two needles lifted and steadied. He was very carefully juggling aspect, rate of climb and air-speed, when there came an imperious rap at the door at his back, and it slid open.

"The fog," Cardan snapped. "We can see nothing. I wish pictures, from the air. We are too high. You must go down."

Now it starts, Quarry thought. Aloud, he said, "You're out of luck, mister. We're not going down, but up." He eyed the altimeter, dubiously. They were not climbing fast enough.

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"No more joking!" Cardan shouted. "Go down . . . at once!"

"You go and sit!" Quarry told him, sharply. "You're interfering with my trim. This fog, as you call it, goes all the way down to the so-called ground, and all the way up to about three hundred miles. And sideways. Just too bad for your pictures, but we did try to tell you, remember?"

"But how then shall we take pictures?" Cardan screeched, and Quarry bit his lip to kill a chuckle.

"That's your problem. You're the expert."

"Hah!" Cardan muttered something vehement in his native tongue, then, "How long shall we have to put up with this . . . this blindness?"

"It should take us about five hours to get where you want to be . . ."

"Five hours?" he screeched, again. "It is only five hundred miles. You can go faster . . ."

"Not in this!" Quarry lost his patience, suddenly. "Only a fool would try to beat a hundred, in this soup. Why don't you go and sit, and let me get on with my part of the job, hey?" He heard the door slam, but was too concerned with his instruments to bother much. Almost levelled off, now, he was trying to climb, and it was a labor. Three thousand feet was a bare minimum. He had to make more. He leaned on the throttles, cautiously. All at once, he felt the tail drop and the airspeed sagged. Guessing at once what had happened, he twisted round in his seat, slid the door back, and shouted.

"Downey!" Pale faces in the gloom looked back at him. "Downey . . . that damned truck of yours is loose. Do something about it, or we'll all be down in the mud!" Without waiting an answer, he jerked the door shut and swung back to his board. Juggling desperately, he got the bows down to a reasonable angle of climb, gave the motors a touch more power, and wondered how much longer they would hold out, at this altitude. In his mind's eye he could see the centrifuge filters spouting out the soupy spore-dust, maintaining clean air to the jets. They were efficient, but they had limits, and overdrive at this altitude was crowding that limit dangerously.

HE WAS in a cleft stick. More power meant more chance of a choke, but he had to have more power to climb out of the thick stuff into reasonably thin air. He leaned on the throttles again, anxiously. He wanted to see ten thousand on that altimeter, at least. It crept, grudgingly. The 'point' was steady. He let one hand free to pre-set the autopilot. Six thousand, and still climbing. He held his breath and

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touched the throttles just a shade more.

Number Two rev counter fell, and the change in sound came with it. Even as the needle was falling, Quarry flipped the auto-pilot on, slid out of his seat, seizing and buckling a life-line round his waist. The other end of the line was secure to a strut between his feet. All in one movement, he kicked the access-door open, spat violently as the little cockpit was instantly flooded with slimy mist, and slid out, feet first. By blind feel he went along the fuselage, groping for the intake cowling. The mist caressed him with luminous, greasy fingers, but he ignored it, concentrating on the picture in his mind. That, by the feel and shudder, was Number One motor. He set his foot on it, groped round to the left. Here the howling din was slightly less. Here, somewhere.

He had it. Solid and still. Leaning over, he slid his fingers into the discharge ducts, and dug into the cheesy mass that was jammed solid there. As it came out by the slimy handful, he found time to marvel, again, at the way the sporedust, whipped into cream by the centrifuge, could find and maintain a foothold in the face of that tornado blast. As he cleared the first of the two ducts he felt the outsurge of hot air, which meant that the spindle was still spinning. Warned by that, he was not surprised when the motor burst into howling life right by his head. Spitting out a mouthful of goo, he dug into the second discharge, felt the globby stuff splatter against his arm. No time to stop and be thankful. He pulled up straight, began wriggling back, dazed by the noise . . . feeling for handholds . . . hoping he hadn't lost too much height.

A chattering . . . a cough . . . and the motor beneath his feet fell silent. Even as he crouched, to reach for it, another chatter told of a second failure. And then a third.

"Leaving one," he muttered, hearing the motor he had just cleared pick up into a frantic scream. That would be the auto-pilot, blindly trying to maintain forward speed, for lift. 'This is it!' he thought, and hung on for a moment, unable to think what to do next, or whether it was worth trying to do anything. He could sense the shift in aspect by the strain on his wrists, and renewed his hold to compensate. The cockpit was now 'above' him, ten feet away, and the craft was falling. Not very fast, what with the contra-grav, and one valiant motor, but falling, just the same. He began to climb, desperately.

"Looks as if Graves is going to get his long walk, after all," he mumbled, "I hope he enjoys it . . ." and the greasy hand-hold

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wrenched clear of his fingers as a gust of hot air swept him up. Not 'up', his mind told him, even as he flailed and yelled, seeking something to grab hold. He was falling, but the ship was falling faster still. The contra-grav must have blown out. That lone engine would be worse than useless, now. Part of his mind struggled, insanely, to compute the flight path of the falling plane, under the eccentric thrust of one motor. The rest of him cringed from the inevitable end of everything. His life-line snapped taut, jerking the breath from his body in a grunt. Mist whipped by his head. A solid something hit him. Bright lights burst in his skull. Then darkness.

STILL dark, and warm. Somewhere, very close, there was pain. He was standing on his head, and the whole universe spun round him, slowly. He opened his eyes and the pain washed in. He was hanging, head-down, jack-knifed over his safety-belt, spinning. A foot away from his nose, dark sullen water rippled. As he squinted at it, there came a scurry of pin-points of red-glowing neon, making a spatter of ripples. Not fancying a bath in that water, he screwed his head round, painfully. He made out the leathery bole of a tree, almost within reach, and all of fifteen feet thick. He was snagged on a branch, like a fish on a line.

Wriggling, and half-blinded by the pain in his skull, he managed to right himself, get his feet to that bole, and then to go up, hand-over-hand, until he fell, wet and breathless, across the branch. Rested, he crawled up, sat, tugged his line. It went up, across, around. Again he threw his weight on to it, scrambled, and fetched up on another branch, shaking with effort.

Now he could see what was left of the plane. In the sickly yellow glow he saw his cockpit, level with his head, six feet away. Peering down, he saw that the annular wing had torn away, bodily. At a guess, the craft had struck solidly, and the motors had kept right on going. But the cabin fuselage looked reasonably intact. His line felt firm enough. Taking up the slack, he leaned out, swung, and managed to scramble back into his own cockpit once more. There was a greasy film over everything. The self-luminous dials registered uniform zero, except one. The 'point' showed life. The two needles surged rhythmically to the pulse from the beacon, telling him that he was eight degrees left off-course.

"That's all *you* know!" he mumbled. "Still, if I can only get you loose from the board, you'll show me the way home . . ."

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and he twisted round to reach for the tool-kit. His eye fell on the door to the cabin, and he caught his breath.

"Good grief . . . the passengers!" he groaned. "I'd forgotten all about them." Out of his seat, he struggled with the door, managed to force it open, to look down into gloomy darkness and the smell of fear. Reaching back, he secured a hand-lamp and poured its harsh white beam down there. His first impression was of havoc. Like the heavy motors, the contra-grav unit had torn itself free, and the ruptured floor of the cabin showed the way it had gone. The seats were twisted and wrenched back up against the walls. He could see arms and legs showing. He heard a whimper of shock. Taking a loop of line round his pilot-seat, he clipped the lamp to his belt, and lowered himself into the cabin, scrabbling for a foothold. The beam skittered, fell full on a staring face. Cardan. Or, more accurately, it had been Cardan. There was no fire in those glassy eyes, now. Quarry put out a hand to feel. Neck broken. Never knew what hit him. Probably luckier than the rest, that way. Damned unfair, too. He'd got them all into this, and now he was out of it, the easy way. Quarry shifted his feet and the light swung. A voice.

"Gimme a hand, can't you . . . over here . . ." It was Gilmore, the cameraman, struggling to get free of the clutch of a ruined seat. Quarry climbed across to apply the weight of his foot, and the seat crackled apart.

"That's it!" Gilmore panted. "Now, let me get up there, so I can see. I want pictures of this," and he brushed past. Quarry shoved the lamp into his hand.

"Take this," he said. "Shine it down here, so I can see who else is worth saving. Such as women . . ." If Gilmore heard the sarcasm, he gave no sign. Quarry groped his way down. A flutter of white and red caught his eye. Miss Rogers and Miss Taliafiero were jammed in a heap, pinned against the curved bulkhead. He caught hold and heaved, and the sweat ran into his eyes, but the wreckage held firm. There came a rending crash at his back, and a thick voice.

"What the hell happened?" Quarry squinted round, to see Cortayne throwing away the shattered pieces of his seat.

"Full story later," he grunted. "Right now I can use some of your horsepower. Give us a hand, here."

Miss Rogers was limply unconscious, with a lump on her forehead that would be a beautiful shade of purple, soon.

"Who's got the light? You, Gilmore? Hold it steady a bit . . ." and Hector laid Miss Rog-

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ers over his shoulder like a doll, went climbing up.

"Useful things, muscles," Quarry said, softly, watching him go. As he turned to touch Miss Taliafiero, she moved.

"I'm all right," she said, quietly. "It was a crash?"

"That's right," he said, noticing the trace of accent in her voice. "You'd better hold still 'till Cortayne gets back. It's ragged stuff, this plastic."

"Very well. Others are hurt, do you know?"

"Cardan is dead. Don't know about the rest, yet." Cortayne came back, to extend a long, strong arm, and she went up nimbly, like a cat. Gilmore showed the light again, and there was a gentle call, from the very lowest seat. It was the Reverend Malt, and unhurt.

"I think . . ." he said, breathlessly, as he struggled from his seat, "that the two soldiers were in the hold." Quarry frowned, eyed the door under his feet. If the truck had obeyed the same laws as the contra-grav and the motors, then the whole rear end of the hold was probably burst open.

"Got Graves," Cortayne called down. "He's out cold, but alive."

"Pass him up out of it," Quarry called back, "and then come down here, give me a hand with this door. Downey and Brand are in there."

AS THEY stood either side of the double door, Cortayne looked, as near as he could manage, really distressed. For him, it was a stiff grin.

"Might as well get it open," he muttered, and bent to seize the handgrips. Quarry bent with him. Together they heaved.

"Whole damned plane made of plastic?" Cortayne grunted, as muscles leaped up like cables across his shoulders.

"Right!" Quarry jerked, heaving until the blood thundered in his head, "Good reason . . . for it . . . Ah!" and the tough fabric screamed as it came free.

"Christ!" the strong man gasped, as he stared at the black, oily water which lapped six inches below the door.

"About what I'd figured," Quarry sighed, wearily, and straightened his aching back. "That truck must have torn the whole butt-end of the ship off. So there goes Downey. And Brand. And all your equipment. Everything. All gone!"

He followed Cortayne up the ragged ruin of the floor, into the steady beam from the lamp, wondering, stupidly, where all the others had gone. They couldn't all be crammed into the cockpit. They weren't. The lamp was wedged on a splinter of plastic. Graves was slumped in the pilot-seat, with Miss Rogers on his knee, both dead to the world.

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Cortayne crouched by the access-door.

"It's nothing of a jump to that branch," he said, "but it's going to be a job getting these two over."

"Life-line," Quarry grunted, unbuckling it, and wincing as the heavy fabric chafed raw flesh. "You hop over, take the slack. I'll rope these two, and you can swing 'em across." The rest of the party were perched in an uneasy row along the branch, with Gilmore at the far end, camera to his face. Last one to leave, and Quarry had a positive dislike for the idea. Once away from the craft, they were afoot, and helpless. He threw out the irrational fear, braced himself to think, to think of anything and everything that might possibly be of use . . . now, before it was too late.

THE control-board pocket yielded a handful of vit-enz capsules. He took them. The seat-locker held all sorts of things, none useful, until he touched the ultra-violet lamp. Standard equipment for sterilizing anything of fungus and mould. That would be handy. He clipped it to the waist-band of his shorts, went back into the cabin. There were two more U-V lamps in the racks, and more capsules. He felt the thud of feet, and Cortayne's anxious voice called.

"You all right?"

"I'm fine. Here, take these," he passed up the two lamps and the capsules. Then, making his way back to the cockpit, he caught sight of the 'point'. That, of all things, was the essential. Groping for a screw-driver, he began to free it from the panel. Cortayne watched, curiously, and Quarry gave him a side-look.

"This will show us the way, at least," he said. "Chances are about nil, in any case, but with this we can at least point the right way," and the whole craft lurched suddenly, and fetched up solid again. "Hop out!" Quarry advised, grimly, without pausing a moment, "Leave a loop of slack for me, but get clear. No sense in both of us buying it." The screws came free, and he wrenchd the bulky instrument out of its nest as the craft gave another lurch. Wrapping the slack round one arm, he cradled the instrument in the other, and scrambled out of the hatch. With the aid of Cortayne's good right arm, he managed to make it to the branch, and sat.

"You don't know it," he said to the big man, "but I owe you an apology for what I thought about you at first. Big, beautiful and useless . . . but we'd have been in a bad way without you, that's for sure." Cortayne smiled his beautiful smile, through the sweat.

"That's all right," he said,

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awkwardly. "I've run into it before. All actors are supposed to be limp-wristed. It's a sort of tradition, I guess."

The hulk of the plane, now seven feet away, gave another rending lurch, and fell away into the yellow gloom. The shock of its fall shook the branch they sat on. Then there was hushed silence again. Quarry looked down at the dim grey bulk that was barely visible. Suddenly he saw it heave and out of the stillness came a muffled roar, together with the crack and screech of tortured fabric. Then, blindingly, the white beam of a searchlight sliced the gloom. Hector flashed the hand-lamp that he had rescued, and the beam swung, and picked them out, on the branch.

"The Lord is with us," Malt whispered. "We are not forgotten."

"That must be the truck," Quarry shielded his eyes. "With Downey and Brand. They said it was submersible. They must have been in it when we hit. Helloooo!" His hail died in the gloom, and a faint cry came back. The engine roar came nearer, then stopped, letting the silence surge back.

"Solid ground, here," came a faint voice. "You all right? Can you get down?"

"It's about fifteen feet," Hector stood up. "I could drop into it, swim over, hook up that line."

"Hold on," Quarry restrained him. "That's not just ordinary water. Try it this way," and he gathered up the line, bent the end-loop into the lamp-grip. Then he lowered it, alight, and began swinging it. Soon, at the far end of the swing, they could see Downey, standing on the truck. The lamp skimmed the dark water, and there was a violent splash as something big and black sliced the surface in a bold attempt to snatch it. Then Downey had the end, and called.

"All secure, here. Come on down."

COMES the other end," Quarry shouted back, passing the belt-end of the line under the branch and swinging it to Downey. "Now . . ." he said, to Hector, "we have a double line. Easier, that way. And let's not sag too close to the water, eh? You want to go first, Mr. Gilmore, and get some more pictures?" The cameraman was already at his elbow, and willing.

"Great stuff, this," he enthused. "Wish the light was a bit better, though." And slinging his camera over a shoulder he stepped on to the bottom line, took the top one under his arms, and went swiftly down the slope as if he did such things every day. Maybe he does, at that, Quarry thought, wryly, watching him. Miss Rogers had recov-

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ered, and was ready to try the descent, carefully. Miss Taliafiero slid down, briskly. Malt made a slow, but steady job of it. Then Hector, with Watney Graves slung round his neck, stepped on to the line.

"Not much fire in this guy," he said, reprovingly, "Comes of living the wrong kind of life." And away he went, sliding swiftly. Quarry shook his head. This was all wrong. These people weren't panning out at all the way he had figured. He had seen them as prostrated and terrified by this jungle . . . almost, he thought of it as 'his' jungle . . . but they seemed to be taking it in their stride. Clutching the 'point', he stepped on to the line and slid down. With six of them, the top of the truck was crowded. Downey stuck his head up out of the hatch.

"Room for a small one, inside," he said. "Smart idea, that double line. Did you see that thing that snapped at the lamp? Mouth like a bag-full of razor-blades."

"Better take Graves," Quarry sighed, "and take a look at him, too." While that was being arranged, he released the line, hauled it in, looping it up. It would be a load, and he was already loaded, but eighty feet of rot-proof line, with a one-ton breaking strain, was too precious to discard, right now. The loop-line idea had been prompted purely from the need to save the line, but there was no point in telling Downey that.

"All right, then." Downey poked his head up again. "Let's get moving. You got any idea which way we ought to point from here, mister?" Quarry heard him as if from a distance. All at once, everything had gone out-of-focus and unreal, as if they were all figures in a dream. Sweat ran from him as he put out a hand to lean on Hector. His legs felt like water. Remotely, he heard Hector say.

"Here, you don't look so good . . ." and then, "He had a hell of a crack on the head. Concussion, maybe." And another faint voice, bitterly.

"Oh great, that's just what we wanted." And then fingers fumbled with the 'point', to take it from him. Dragging in a deep breath, he clutched the instrument, resisting those fingers, and the blurry feeling receded.

"I'll be all right," he said, thickly, "and I'm hanging on to this." He held it tight, braced himself to look down at it, peering at the twin needles, and made a quarter turn. "Venus Prime is that way," he raised an arm that felt like lead. Downey shouted something incomprehensible to the sergeant, inside, and the motors growled as the truck wheeled. Quarry fought to get a grip on himself, felt the sweat and shiv-

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ers pass off, and his brain begin to function again.

"Hold it a bit," he said, to the back of Downey's head. "You don't think you're going to drive this thing with us riding on top, do you?"

"You have a better idea, like getting inside, maybe?" the lieutenant half-turned. "Because you can forget it. There isn't room for any more."

"There isn't a lot of solid ground, either," Quarry retorted. "What little is known of the terrain shows that it's mostly swamp, with a thin cover of matted vegetation. You were lucky to find this bit."

"So?"

"So you'll go on ahead, and we'll follow."

"On foot?" Downey turned all the way round, now, amid the murmurings of the rest. "You were the one who said nobody had ever made more than five miles at a time, on foot. And we must be all of fifty miles away from the base, now."

"Nearer sixty," Quarry corrected. "I was trying to climb, and going faster than usual, all because of this damned truck. This is what caused all the damage."

"And this is what is going to pull us all out of it, so it cuts both ways."

"This . . ." Quarry said, "will be lucky if it goes five yards without diving. I'm going to walk . . ." and he got down. In the gloom, he could see the others hesitate, and then follow, scrambling down on to the slippery mud. He heard the lieutenant curse, softly. Then,

LISTEN, folks. Somebody has got to be in charge, here, else we're never going to get any place. Mr. Cardan is dead, so I'm told, and I'm sure we're all sorry about it, but it seems that leaves me as the most qualified person to take responsibility for getting us all safely back to base . . . ?"

"All right, so you're the leader," Quarry called. "You go on ahead, and we'll follow. You have the direction." He heard Downey curse again, and the motors cut him off as they burst into a roar. "Don't get too close to that truck," he warned the two women. "We'll follow you, and take it easy, this is no picnic."

The footing was spongy, but manageable. On all sides, great trunks reared up into the gloom, glowing in ghostly colors. "Truly, this is a strange place. Why are we free of the ever-present mist?"

"One of those things," Quarry answered. "The scientists aren't sure why, but wherever there's a cluster of trees, like this, the mist seems to keep away. But it's only thinned out. And it isn't mist, at all. There's a certain amount of

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water-vapor in it, sure, but it's loaded with microscopic fungus spores, and micro-organisms of all kinds. And they don't seem to like the trees, at all."

"They're queer, all right." Hector put his head back to follow one purple-glowing giant bole up into the gloom. "Skin like leather, straight as columns, and they shine. Look, there's another yellow one."

"You'll see queerer things than that," Quarry assured him, as they slithered through a knee-deep patch. "This place breaks all the rules. Those trees, for instance, almost certainly don't belong here. You see, about fifty years ago, when the first manned probes went into orbit round this planet, the guess was that the high percentage of carbon dioxide in the upper atmosphere indicated a lack of organic growth down here. None of the probes-to-ground would work, because of the crazy magnetic fields, so they had to go on that guess. And somebody had the big bright idea of seeding the place with plant life. They threw down just about everything they could think of . . . grasses, canes, mosses, creepers . . . and trees. Seedlings, pine cones, acorns, things like that. And they did a thorough job of it. Then they sat back and waited for the mist to evaporate. Ten years ago they managed to establish Prime base, down on the surface. They've been going slowly crazy, ever since, trying to sort out the mess."

"All mixed up, eh?"

"That's putting it mildly. There already was life, plenty of it, here. Some of our stuff died off, of course, but a lot of it managed to thrive. Now you can't tell whether a plant, a tree, or anything else, is native or hybrid or what. And the spore-mist is still here, as thick as ever . . . whoa up! Something's gone wrong, ahead . . ." He went ahead, rapidly, and sank up to his waist. Peering, he could see Miss Rogers, shoulder deep. To Hector, who came up alongside, he said, "Take the end of the line. Malt, back him up . . ." and he waded forward until he could grab Miss Rogers by the hand, and pull. Then he could see that she held on to the hand and arm of Miss Taliafiero, who was in up to her neck.

"Hold on tight," he said, as steadily as he could, and shouted back to Hector to heave, hard. They went back, slowly, oozingly, until they were in the comparative dry again. Miss Rogers was gasping, and speechless. Miss Taliafiero, in spite of her struggle for breath, and the green slime that covered her from the neck down, was more composed.

"WE WERE foolish," she said. "Right behind the truck,

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very close, and then . . . squoosh . . . it just went down, right under. I think, maybe, they had the top down."

"I hope you're right," Quarry muttered. "We'd better back up, anyway. If they're still capable, that's what they're going to do, and we're right in the way, here." They plodded back a yard or so, and waited. Malt put a gentle hand on Quarry's arm, to draw his attention.

"Look here," he whispered, and, lifting his leg, he poked a finger through the slimed material of his trouser-leg. "The fabric has rotted," he said.

"Right," Quarry nodded. "You'd have to know, sooner or later. Like I said, the mist is still here, only thinned out. And it's hungry. It eats most metal molecules . . . that's why the plane was almost all plastic . . ." to Hector, who was listening. "The engines are metal-plastic plated, and they don't last long. The mist also eats any and all organic waste. Just about anything that isn't alive. Some of our synthetic plastics manage to stand up . . ." There came a squelching splatter and roar from the gloom ahead, and then the glare of the searchlight. And Quarry had a sudden idea.

"I'm a fool," he muttered. "Must be that knock on the head." He stepped into the beam, waved Downey to stop. "Hang on there a bit," he called. "We'll be right back." To Hector he said, "Look, if we go back as far as the wreck, we might be able to find a chunk of the body-work big enough to make a sort of skid, or sled, that we can all sit on, and let the blasted truck haul us. You with me?"

"Sounds all right," Hector nodded, and they turned back, following the gashes made by the truck treads. Half an hour of plodding brought them to the scene of the wreckage, and within ten minutes, Quarry had laid his hand on a shattered slab that had been a motor-fairing. It might have been designed for what he had in mind, and he was just about to turn and call Hector, when the dark sludge erupted, no more than five feet from where he was standing.

Holding his breath, he saw a dull brown, leathery, pointed thing push up. A head like a torpedo, with only a hint of neck, and then foot after foot of snake-like body, all of six feet in diameter, dripping slime. He felt for one of the U.V. lamps, hoping that Hector would have the sense to keep still. That great head was swinging, groping, until it was pointing straight at him. Then its two great eyes opened, like dull headlamps. This was the moment. It had spotted him before looking, but the eye-opening was the sign that it knew of him. He

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aimed the almost invisible beam of the lamp straight for those huge eyes. Instantly, they fired into a bright glare, and then flap-lids snapped down, the pointed snout retracted to show a round mouth ringed with razor teeth, and he winced at the ear-shattering scream that whistled out on stench-laden breath.

"What the hell was that?" Hector gasped, staggering through the mud to where Quarry stood, watching the subsiding mud-ripples.

"A kind of worm, so the big-domes say. Here, you'd better take one of these lamps. Ultra-violet. Handy things. The life, here, is sensitive to it." Hector took the lamp, clipped it to his waist-band, and laid his hands on the chunk of plastic. He heaved, trying the weight of it to be sure it would hold.

"If that's a worm," he said, "I don't want to see a snake" and Quarry grinned, wryly. Together they managed to get the lump of stuff moving, skidding over the muddy surface, until they could hook the line to it. Then they started to haul.

"Not all as big as that," Quarry explained. "Mostly little ones. But they are pretty bad, too. They stick on, like a sucker, and then eat their way in. You have to catch them real quick, or it's too bad. Once the head gets going, you can chop off the rest, but it keeps right on going, just the same. That's why I didn't want you to go swimming." The way back to the truck seemed to have stretched itself out ten-fold, and Quarry felt his legs buckling like straw by the time they saw the searchlight again. Even Hector was laboring for breath.

"THIS heat," he puffed, "Takes all the fight out of a man. Doesn't it ever let up, get cool at night times . . . ?"

"Night or day is all pretty much the same." Quarry settled himself, thankfully, on the new solidness, waved the others to climb aboard. He could see Downey, his head out of the truck-hatch, listening. The women had been making futile attempts to scrape off the worst of the slime.

"Time you learned a thing or two," he said, wearily. "This atmosphere eats just about anything that isn't actually living. That's why the trees haven't any bark, as we know it. And that's why, unless you're wearing orlon, dacron, or some similar synthetic, you're all going to be naked as babies, right soon. For what difference it makes . . . we have more important things to think about than conventions. To start with, how much can we carry, without pockets or straps?"

Gilmore, characteristically, was quite happy.

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"Plastic straps," he said. "Plastic carry case, and I dipped this camera, like you said. For the rest, I don't give a damn." Quarry eyed him, and thought, but said nothing, waiting for the others. Miss Taliafiero summed it, crisply.

"We're too rich," she said, "to wear synthetic. Nothing but silk, genuine leather, cotton, wool, for us. It is poetic justice, maybe?"

"That's a point of view," Quarry grunted. "My point is—these" and he held up a pack of vit-enz capsules. "I have ten of these, and there are seven caps to a pack. One a day is the dose, and there are nine of us."

"What are they for?" Miss Rogers asked, fearfully, "against disease?"

"Nothing like that. That's the one thing we don't have to worry about. This mist, even here, is the finest anti-biotic you could want. That's the trouble. Without intestinal bacteria to do our digesting for us, we'll starve to death. That's what these are for. And, as I'm the only one with pockets that will stand up to rot, I'd better carry them." He stood up, moving gingerly to the edge nearest the truck, studying the jagged plastic and unhooking the line from his shoulders.

"If I tie this, here," he said, to Downey, "and pass you the other end, you can secure it to a ringbolt, can't you? Then you can rattle on ahead as much as you want, and we'll be right behind you." Downey took the end of the line.

"We have grub aboard," he muttered, so that the rest couldn't hear, "and some of those packs of capsules, but no medical kit."

"Medical kit?" Quarry frowned, then caught on. "You mean . . . Graves? Is he badly hurt?"

"Can't tell for sure, but he seems to have broken something, inside. Got pains in the guts, and spitting blood every now and then."

"There isn't a damn thing we can do about it," Quarry said, grimly. "Except hope that we get out in the thick mist, soon, and find water fit to drink. The one is easy, the other not so. Better make a start . . . use this truck while we have it . . ." and Downey looked at him, sharply.

"You think we're going to run out of fuel, maybe?"

"Not that, but look . . ." and Quarry scraped his finger along the curved metal of the machine. Downey stared at the result, and swallowed. "As I was telling the others . . . this atmosphere eats just about anything, including metal."

"Christ!" Downey scraped at the surface for himself, and his face sagged. Then, urgently, he ducked back into the hatch, and

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his voice could be heard, in rapid argument.

Soon he returned.

"Here," Downey nudged him, "Give a hand with Graves. Get him down on the float." Quarry reached out, felt Hector by his side. They laid the limp form over the hull and down on the curved plastic. Downey followed, holding a tiny transmitter. He thumbed it.

"You read me, Steve?" he asked, and over the buzz of static came Brand's voice, thin but understandable.

"Read you, lieutenant. Dropping the hatch, ready when you say."

"Forget that 'lieutenant' stuff, damn it, Steve. All right, go . . . and don't take any chances . . ." The truck growled, and waddled off into the gloom. Downey took the weight of the slack, and Quarry gave a hand, so that they paid out the line steadily, and had the float sliding before the slack ran out.

"Damned pig-head," Downey muttered. "I told him the truck was liable to seize up, so he argued there was no sense in both of us getting stuck with it. Practically threw me out, and 'sir-ing' me, all the time. But we'll change over, as soon as we find a place where we can have a spell . . . if I have to pull rank on him to do it. We lined up O.K.?" Quarry consulted the 'point' that he had never let go of, and nodded. "That's all right, then. There's a gyro-point in the truck . . . so long as it holds out."

Quarry sagged back, letting the curved plastic prop him up, thankful to be able to relax. His stomach was churning, and that feeling of unreality was coming back. At his feet, Graves lay ominously still, with a trickle of something that looked black in this light, coming from the corner of his mouth. The sway of the float was soporific, and the weird, dim-lit landscape sliding past contributed to the sense of dream-illusion. Looking across, Quarry could see the two women. He'd been wrong about them, he mused. Both were wet, slimy, dirty and ragged. But the differences were striking. Miss Rogers looked hopeless, helpless and stunned . . . and he'd thought her the tough one. Miss Taliafiero, without her dark glasses, and smeared with slime, looked defiant, somehow. Almost angry. He wondered, idly, where she got the energy from, and how he had ever made the mistake of thinking her pampered and delicate.

HE WOKE to the sudden cessation of movement, and the urgent note in Downey's voice. His head still ached, but reasonably, now.

"Declutch . . . and run the motors right up . . . shake them

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loose . . . that's it Now, try again . . ." Downey clutched the handset, listening.

"What?" Quarry asked, easing his aching back from the hard plastic.

"Starboard motor seized . . . no, it's all right again . . ." as a crackling comment came from the speaker, and the float began to surge forward again.

"How far d'you reckon we've come?"

"Fifteen miles, maybe." Downey wiped a greasy hand across his chin. "We've had to dodge about a bit, to miss the trees, and the truck's been submerged most of the time. Hah . . . there it is, now!" He gestured to where the beam of the searchlight suddenly cut the gloom. There was a greyish thickness to the beam.

"Mist beginning to thicken," Quarry guessed. "If it's anything to go by, we should be clearing the trees, soon." Then, over the far-away roar of the motors, he caught the sound of splashing, like a water-fall. He strained his ears.

"What's that?" Downey demanded, as he heard it.

"Bit of luck for us, if it's what I think. Soon see. We're getting closer." The handset gave a thin cry.

"I'm out on the solid again, lieutenant. Watch for it, let me know when you hit . . ." and Downey stood up, peering forward. He gasped, suddenly, as they ran into a solid wall of warm water.

"Stop the truck!" Quarry snapped, and stood up, shielding his face. The rest of the party woke up, spluttering and gasping.

"Drinking water," he told them, briefly. "It's a tree . . . or fungus . . . or whatever you like, which pumps water from way down, up through tube roots, and sprays it out at the top."

"So it's weird," Gilmore commented, reaching for his beloved camera, and swearing as the spray went all over his face. "But why stop right here? We're only getting wet!"

"Also clean, if that matters. Downey, have you any containers in that truck? We ought to store some of this. Apart from these trees, drinking-water is hard to come by."

"What sort of a fungus is it that spits pure water?" Hector marvelled, as Downey slid over the edge and made for the truck.

"Didn't say it was a fungus . . ." as they stood and luxuriated in the warm spray. "It's a carnivore, whatever else it may be. It eats whatever is unlucky enough to get sucked in. And there goes the last shred of your shorts!"

Hector made an instinctive, and futile, grab.

At that moment Quarry no-

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ticed that Malt was on his knees by Graves, splashing his face. The script-writer wrenched to a coughing spasm, and there was pink in the froth on his lips. Quarry knelt alongside Malt.

"Try to swallow some of the water," he said, gently. "It might help. We'll be breaking out the meal-packs, any time now."

"None for me," Graves mumbled, his face in a wry grimace. "This is the end of my chapter. Can't feel a thing below my chest . . ."

"Just lie still," Quarry advised, meaninglessly.

"Got any pain-killer?" Graves muttered. "Never could stand pain. Always preferred to see other people suffer. Wish I could have been lucky enough to hang on and watch you all die." Malt drew in a quick breath and ceased all movement. Hector put his huge yet sensitive hand against Graves' scrawny throat, and shook his head.

"He's dead," he said, simply, and Malt bowed his head.

QUARRY realized the need to move on. "You got the food-packs out?" he added.

"Brand has some back there a bit. No sense in sitting here in the rain. Can I give you a hand, Miss Taliafiero?" Downey scrambled over the edge of the float, and offered his arm.

"You can have my shirt, Miss," the lieutenant said. "It's nylon. I'll get Brand to pass his along to Miss Rogers . . ."

Within a yard or two, the footing changed from ankle-deep sludge to spongy but firm moss. By some unspoken arrangement, the two women had grouped with Malt, leaving the rest of the men to huddle by the bole of a tree. Except Gilmore, who ate on the move, and couldn't keep still.

"A nut, that guy," Brand grunted, watching him. "Camera on the brain."

"He *is* a camera," Quarry said, mildly. "That's all he can think about. But he's no more a nut than Graves, or Cardan, or any of you. Just that his is a bit more obvious, that's all."

"You keep crossing me, mister," Downey warned, "and we'll have trouble. I don't like the way you talk. Calling me a nut . . ."

"All I meant was, your bug is 'authority'. You wouldn't be a lieutenant, otherwise. You believe that somebody should be 'in charge', take responsibility for the rest, give orders, and so-on."

"And you reckon that's all wrong?"

"Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't. Me, I have all I can manage just to take responsibility for myself."

"Ah!" Downey got up, snorting in disgust. "That's double-talk, to me. Hey Dan!" he caught the ranging cameraman with a

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gesture. "Let's you and me go put Graves away, while the ladies are eating . . ." and they went off into the gloom, to the float. Brand strained his eyes to follow, then swallowed the last mouthful of the pasty mass that had been a freeze-dried steak.

DARK, all the time, except for these shining trees," he said. "Don't you ever see the sun, here?"

"I haven't seen the sun in four years."

"Doesn't the rotation make any difference?" Brand asked, groping for the ideas. "I mean . . . night and day, that kind of thing?" He shook his head as he looked around. "I don't know much about this kind of thing," he confessed. "The damned planet does turn, doesn't it?"

"The period is about nine and a half days," Quarry told him. "But it makes very little difference. The mist blanket is around one hundred fifty miles deep, and day or night is all about the same. There is something you ought to know, though. Wait, here comes Downey. He might as well hear it." The lieutenant came up, heavily, to slump by them, against the tree bole. Quarry unhooked the U.V. lamp from his belt, held it so they could see.

"I was telling Brand . . . we never get any sunlight here, but this is the sun's little brother. Very good for the complexion. Ultra-violet."

"Who cares about getting sunburned, at a time like this?"

"I was talking about skin. Your skin, the outside layer, is dead. Did you know that? It's included in what I called 'organic waste'. So is hair." The two soldiers stared, uncomprehendingly. To Brand, Quarry said, "How long since you shaved?" and Brand automatically rubbed his chin. And again, slowly.

"No stubble," he said, amazedly. Downey caught his breath.

"You mean . . . we'll end up skinned raw, and bald?"

"No, not that bad. But you'll have a skin like a baby, you'll never need a shave, and you'll keep, if you're lucky, about two inches of hair. But you'll chafe easy, and that's where these lamps come in. Also handy for scaring off the wild life. They can't stand U.V."

"How many you got?" Downey demanded, quickly.

"Three, with this. And they're staying on top, on the float. One of these times, that truck is going down, to stay. I'm not leaving anything valuable on it, to get lost."

"Apart from me and Brand, eh?"

"We can all start walking, if you like," Quarry told him, flatly. He'd already thought up to this

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point, and could see no alternative. He wondered, now, what Downey's reaction would be. The lieutenant was silent, frowning, looking blacker every minute. Then,

"Damn you. Damn this blasted planet, and everything that goes with it . . . every last, rotten, stinking, scummy, blasted inch of it . . ."

"Fine, if it makes you feel better. Now, what do you have, in the way of useful stuff that we don't want to lose?" Downey seemed to pull on some inner store of resolution.

"I guess you're right, at that. We have to be practical. All right. We have grub, in cases, and some water-bottles. We'll split them. Also, we have magnetic rifles, but they're powered from the truck generator . . . so there's no choice, there. Come on, sergeant . . ." and he stressed the word, meaningly, "we have work to do. And it's my turn to drive. All right?"

FIFTEEN minutes later, they were rolling again, but Brand sat by the hand-set, red-eyed and scowling. Ahead, the slim line disappeared into rainbow haze, and the float seemed to be riding in pearly radiance, diffused with ever-shifting hues. The curved slab was piled high with food packs and water-bottles. Gilmore had found, to his delight, that his spare cameras had been loaded in the truck. Now he was working on his second.

"No animals?" he called, from where he was perched on the edge. "I want to get some shots of monsters . . . if there are any!"

"Touch wood," Quarry grinned. "The racket we're making is probably scaring them away . . . and that's all right with me, too." To Brand, he said, "Why don't you catch up a bit of sleep? I can hold on to the radio."

"Sleep, hell! That truck is grinding, already. Hear it? If he hits one or two more deep patches, he's really in trouble."

"What could you do, suppose something did happen?" Quarry asked, and Brand turned on him, savagely.

"There isn't a damn thing I could do, and I know it. But I'm going to be handy, when it happens, just the same."

Quarry abandoned the argument, resignedly, and leaned back against the curved rim of the float, surveying his companions. The human animal, he thought, is an unlovely sight, when its dignity is the kind that comes off with clothing. Malt, now, drowsing on the curved floor, leaning against Hector. Fat, flabby . . . and he looked undressed. This was God's handiwork, too? Hector, on the other hand, looked as natural, and com-

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plete, as the magnificent animal he was. Maybe that was Man's mistake, in trying to be more than just an animal.

His eye roved to the two women, asleep and huddled together. He'd been all wrong about them. Miss Rogers was the weak one, leaning on routine, propped up by having someone else to serve. Nothing for herself.

IT MUST be daytime, now," Brand said, suddenly, and Quarry had to wrench his mind back to attend him. "This light, I mean. It's no good for seeing, but it's a sort of glow . . . so the sun must be up there, someplace."

"Doesn't follow," Quarry shook his head. "This is a kind of phosphorescence, just like the mushrooms back on earth. According to the educated guesses, the spore mist acts as a kind of light-energy transport system. The really fine dust ranges high, picks up a diluted form of direct sunlight. Makes them grow, and begin to clump. So they fall, as they grow, and the light-energy gets down here."

"But that wouldn't explain the trees, though. They don't reach clear up into the sunshine, do they?"

"Well, just like any other tree, they reach as high as they can, and they do get first crack at the transported energy. But the big-brains reckon they have also developed some form of photo-multiplier effect. It's all guess-work, though. Just about everything carries its own lights, here . . . listen to that!"

A harsh, grating scream split the quiet drone, and the tow-line jerked violently, almost upsetting the float. Brand thumbed the hand-set, tensely.

"Something's fouled the line." he said. "Back up, and give us a light, quick." The motor noise died, and that grating scream came again. Then, out of the misty glow came the harsh white of the searchlight, swinging round. Miss Rogers screamed, and Quarry couldn't blame her. Just this side of the truck, they saw, dimly, a great greenish-black mass, heaving and bulging. Obviously, part of it had been crushed under the truck-treads, and the rest of it was objecting, blindly.

"It's a slug," Quarry said, and Brand swore.

"That size? Man, it must be all of twenty feet long, and as big as a horse . . ." but, as they stared, the near end drew out into a blunt head, sprouted a cluster of horns, each with its own glowing light. The green forest winked as it slewed that obscene head round, seeking to find what had attacked it. A great yellow cavern of a mouth opened, to give out that scream again. Gilmore

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was over the side, and running, almost before the forward movement had stopped.

"Keep the light on it!" he yelled, and went down on a knee to aim his camera. Then he hopped up and shifted round, following the head, as it swung round in a loop and bent towards the truck. They could just see the hatch open, and the dark blob of Downey's head. Then a glint of light from his hands.

"Oh, the fool!" Quarry whispered, as he guessed that Downey was going to use a rifle on this. There was no sound from the weapon, but the splat-splat of the projectiles came plain enough, as they bit into that shapeless mass. Made of strain-steel, and designed to shatter on impact, they were tearing great chunks of blackish green meat from the slug. But, still screeching, it bore down on the truck, soggily, as unstoppable as a flood.

"Get back in there!" Brand yelled, craning over the side of the float, completely forgetting his radio. "Get that damned hatch down . . ." Just in time, Downey seemed to realize that he was achieving nothing, took the prudent course, and ducked down. They heard the click of the hatch, and the soggy slap of the slug as it spread itself over the hard metal, blanketing the searchlight. Visibility fell off to a yard or two.

"Now what?" Brand snarled. "I can't see a damned thing . . ."

"Stay with the radio." Quarry snapped. "Tell Downey to stay in there. Come on, Hector, and bring a lamp. We have to chase that thing away before it finds Gilmore." Keeping one hand on the line as a guide, he went, hastily, into the mist, with the stench of wounded slug coming strongly to his nostrils. Where the hell was Gilmore? Cautiously, guessing he must be near the truck, he flicked on the lamp. Here, in the mist, its violent glow shone bright, and his heart lifted up into his throat as he saw the dark bulk of the slug right over him, its cavernous mouth agape. With a sense of utter futility, he aimed the lamp square into that mouth, and it shut, with a squelch. Then the blackness of it cringed back, and he nerved himself to follow, although his legs felt like string.

SHOCKINGLY, the searchlight beam broke out again, stabbing through the mist, and Quarry saw that the slug had been on a blind run, straight back along the tow-line. Now it was twisting and curling away, off to one side, snorting. Over the sound of its breathing, Quarry heard the hatch click open again, and turned.

"Hold your fire, damn you."

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he yelled. "You can't kill it . . . you're only making it mad . . ." but Downey was deaf. He cuddled the rifle to his cheek, and Quarry could hear the projectiles whistle. He turned again, just in time to get a flash of something pink, and running, and then the slug had engulfed it, and gone on, slithering, away into the haze. Quarry realized that his arm was aching, from the frantic grip on the lamp he held. Shivering, he forced his hand open, and turned to walk back to the truck. After a minute or two, Hector came up alongside, heavy-footed and grey faced. He swung a camera by a strap.

"I found Gilmore . . . all there was left of him." he said, thickly.

They went back to the float. Quarry faced the others, as if they were strangers, as if they didn't really exist. The way he was feeling, he was looking at dead people.

"Epitaph!" he said, putting the camera down, gently, along with the rest. "I don't think there's anything else worth saying."

THEY rolled on in defeated silence, the mist growing thicker every moment, until they could barely see across the float. It was almost the same as flying, Quarry mused. You had that sense of being all alone. But this was different, in that there were other people involved . . . useless, stupid, fanatical people . . . who kept right on clinging to their set ideas, even if they died for them.

"Lend a hand, here." Brand said, suddenly. "I'm going to haul in. About time we stopped for another bite. My turn to drive, too."

"I'm surprised that truck has kept going so long." Quarry commented, laying hold on the line. "We must have come all of thirty miles. It's a record, if that means anything, under the circumstances."

"This is no time for wit." Brand growled, heaving away. Hector moved up, to lend his weight.

"The mist is a bit thinner, looks like." he said, and Quarry looked around.

"Seems that way. We could be running into another patch of trees. If we have any luck at all, we might find some fruit. Make a change from that mush in the packs. Tell Downey to keep on going a bit, see if we come up with some trees."

"All right," the sergeant nodded, spoke into the handset, and they began sliding forward again. Quarry kept his hand on the bight of line they had taken round the stub of plastic, kept his eyes forward. But his thoughts were on Taliafiero.

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What was it M'Grath had said? 'Jut-busted, pseudo-Italian whore.' But Graves had said 'always so pure and remote.' How could anybody know *what* another person was? And this was a damned fool thing to do, anyway. Andrew Quarry, the nobody, attracted to, even falling for Maria Taliafiero, the great star. Only, she didn't look like a star, at the moment. Downey was lean, and his shirt didn't even begin to cover her, even if she had tried to fasten it, which she hadn't. Jut-busted she was, for sure, but it was genuine flesh, not just blubber. One way and another, she seemed to be a pretty genuine sort of person. And he laughed, wondering how much of that opinion was due to these fantastic circumstances. He felt that she was looking at him, glanced down, and she was.

"Just thinking," he said, softly, noticing, now, that she had a trick of lifting one eyebrow higher than the other. It gave her a rakish look. He wondered if she knew that she was going to lose almost all her eyebrows, soon, along with most her yellow locks.

"Thinking? About me, maybe?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." he decided on the frank admission. Why not?

"You make it sound as if it should not be. But it will be good for you, yes? To think about somebody else, for a change?" Her voice was enigmatically calm. He wondered just what the devil she was getting at. Then Malt put in his timid yet eager voice.

"The mist is thinning again." he said.

There was a strained quiet, and, ahead, the mist rolled back, until they were into a cathedral-like glade of great towering holes, of all colors, glowing silently like pillars of light.

Downey came walking back. "Nicest place we've found, yet." he called. "If it wasn't for the damned heat, it would be pleasant. Know what, I bet an artist would go mad, trying to paint this lot."

"How are the motors?" Quarry asked, as they squatted to rip open some foodpacks and add water.

"Not too good." Downey's grin was forced, now. "I reckon the bearings are beginning to fail. But we'll keep on for a bit yet, all the same. The power-unit packs enough push to drive the damn things even if the bearings go to mush."

They picked out a tree to squat by, and Quarry explained, briefly, while they ate, about the need for ultra-violet treatment. The two women hadn't heard it, and he was only too uncomfortably aware of several painful chafes of his own. Both Maria and Miss

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Rogers felt of their hair, ruefully, when he assured them they would lose it.

"Always I have objected to this." Maria declared, wryly. "Anything else . . . I do, and agree, for the picture. But never will I cut my hair. Now . . ." and she shrugged as she reached for the lamp he held out to her, ". . . it will grow again, someday. Come, Nancy . . . we will go behind the tree . . . for privacy!"

TOUGH as leather, that dame." Downey muttered, as they passed out of sight. "Glamorous, all right, but I like 'em a bit more dependent, myself." Which was all in keeping with his 'authoritarian' slant, Quarry thought. But the lieutenant had something else on his mind. "While the ladies are out of it," he said, lowering his voice, "just how do you rate our chances, Quarry?"

"Zero!" Quarry said, laconically. "We're living on borrowed time."

"That's a hell of a note!" Brand sneered. "We're not dead yet!" Quarry eyed him, curiously. This was the thick-headed kind, that didn't have imagination enough to recognize an unpleasant fact when it came up.

"You're entitled to your opinion. But we ran out of 'yet' some time ago. Because of the truck, we're some thirty miles closer to the end, is all."

Just then the air was filled with a full-lunged scream, insensate in its frenzied violence. They all came up standing, as if electrified. Quarry felt the short hairs lift on his neck as that raving scream came again and again. He felt for his lamp, and remembered that the women had it.

Then Nancy Rogers came reeling round the bole of the tree, her hands to her head, her whole body wrenching to the screams which came with throw-away madness. And her head was a mass of sparkling, glittering fire. Quarry half-stepped towards her, then swung to make for the float. Over his shoulder, he called,

"Knock her down. Gently, but knock her down . . ."

By the time he had scooped up another lamp, and got back to the trees, her screams had stopped, and Hector was standing over her, clenching his fist.

"Try to get her hands clear." Quarry instructed, as he aimed the lamp. "It's all right, I know what I'm doing. These things are a sort of cross between a stag-beetle and a dragon-fly. Thing is, they bite like hell, and they go for anything moving, so everybody keep dead still as soon as they start to move." Under the invisible beam the cluster of

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glowing insects flared brightly. In seconds, they had lifted from her hair like a cloud of flame, and went buzzing off. After a tense wait, Quarry relaxed.

"Turn her over," he said, "just to make sure . . ."

"Is she all right?" It was Maria. Quarry looked up, then got from his knees, heavily, looking at her.

"She'll be all right, I think. What happened to you?" He tried to keep his voice level, but she must have felt the unspoken accusation in it.

"Nancy was using the lamp, on me." she said, steadily. "Then she screamed. She threw the lamp away . . . clutching her head . . .so I went to look for it. It is here, see?" and she held it out to him. "I thought it was the more important . . .?"

"I'm sorry . . . for what I was thinking." he mumbled. She gave him a big smile, that made him feel dizzy. Or it might have been the sudden excitement, and the shock. Miss Rogers stirred, and gave a low moan.

"Help her back to the float" he said. "It's time we got moving again." Sergeant Brand made for the truck, before Downey could object, and soon they heard the roar as the motors ran up. On the float, Downey took up the handset, angrily, thumbed it, but Brand was before him.

"The gyro-point has folded." he said, and Quarry grunted as he heard it.

"We'll have to con him, that's all. My 'point' is still O.K. Look, give me the talker, and you stretch out, get some sleep. You and Brand are the only ones who can drive that damned thing, so you've got to keep fit, as far as you can. I can steer him.

THEY rolled on, Quarry squatting by the tow-line, watching the 'point', as the float slid and heaved over the squishy surface. Despite the multicolored trees, the truck was out of sight, ahead. The longer this grove stretches, he thought, the better for us. But there were losses, too, in that they had to follow a twisting course to dodge the trees that were in the way. The 'point' needles wavered and swung, hypnotically, and he squeezed his eyes tight, to fight off the urge to sleep. The ever-present heat was a drain, on anyone's vitality, even in the best of circumstances. The least effort was hard work.

"You're a bit out to the left." he said into the set. "Pick a right-hand turn, next chance you get."

"Wilco!" Brand's voice came back, amid the crackle, which, like his voice, was getting steadily fainter. "Looks like a bit of clearing ahead . . . sort of pond, far as I can see. Should have a

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free choice, there, if it isn't too deep. On the edge, now" and Quarry squinted ahead. Soon he caught the faint glint of light from a rippling surface. There was no sign of the truck, at all. Only the taut line, cleaving the water.

"Some pond," he breathed, as his eye failed to see the far shore. "Might as well be an ocean." He checked the 'point' and they were dead on course. The plastic float ducked and sent up a fount of warm water as they skidded over the edge and righted. Downey came awake, suddenly, looked round.

"A lake!" he said, and Quarry chuckled.

"That's an advance on your partner. He called it a pond. It can't be all that big, though. We must be within thirty miles or so of Prime Base, and there isn't any very large body of water that close. Trouble is, anything looks a lot, when you can't see more than thirty feet."

"Hey, Brand. Steve!" Downey had taken the handset. "How are the seals, down there?" The answer, if any, was drowned in crackle. Downey shook the set, put it to his mouth . . . and the front of the float dropped, with breath-catching abruptness. Quarry felt himself lifted and thrown forward, gasped as he went into the water, and lashed out, frantically, for the surface. By sheer chance, his fingers met the tow-line. He clutched it, sliding his grip until it came to the slip-hitch he himself had made, against just such a chance as this. Caught up in the same knot was his precious 'point'. He grabbed the instrument, jerked on the knot, and felt the line whip away through his fingers. Then, with bursting lungs, he kicked for the surface. And kicked . . . until his consciousness hovered on the thundering edge of red haze. After what seemed for evermore, he broke surface, sucked in a breath that scorched his throat, and strangled on a mouthful of water. What with the 'point' and the U.V. lamp at his waist, he had to struggle just to keep his nose out. Something would have to go. Thrashing round, he spotted the float, bobbing, and kicked out for it. Reaching it, he went right under as he lifted the instrument clear, felt it roll over the edge. Surfacing again, he took hold, held on, fought for breath.

Then, spurred by thoughts of what might be lurking in the water, he made an almighty effort, and dragged himself up, out and fell over the edge, into safety. For a painful few moments, he coughed, and spat water, and wondered, miserably, if anything was worth this much trouble. A glance showed that the float, now a raft, had been swept clean.

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Then he saw finger-tips clutching the far edge, and crept across, gingerly, to look. It was Malt.

"Help!" he choked, "I can't swim. Help!" Quarry dragged in a deep breath, sprawled himself out flat, leaned over, took hold, and heaved.

"Lie flat, and keep still!" he gasped, as Malt collapsed into the middle of the raft. "I don't fancy another ducking in that." He raised his head as he heard a powerful thrashing coming towards the float. Friend or foe? Then he saw that it was Hector, with something in tow. Shifting on his knees, he called guidance, reached out to help. Seconds later Nancy Rogers sprawled alongside Malt, oozing water from nose and mouth. Quarry gave Malt a non-too-gentle nudge.

"Don't just lie there, man. Do something for her. Turn her over on her face, and squeeze. How about you, Hector?"

"I'm all right," Hector grunted, sliding himself over the edge. But Quarry had spotted the black thing stuck to his shoulder.

"Hold it, right there," he said, crisply, unhooking the lamp from his waist. The worm squirmed, snapped its tail, and then dropped free. Quarry snatched it, as one grabs a hot coal, and sent it over the side. "No, hold still," he repeated, as Hector went to flex his arm. With hard fingers he probed the area of the bite, but it felt soft enough, and the blood flowed freely. "I think it's O.K. Can't feel any head in there, anyway. Now, what about the rest of them?" and they both turned to scan the dark surface of the water.

WHAT happened, anyway?" Hector murmured. "I was asleep . . . then I was in the water . . . how did it happen?"

"The truck went down a hole, I reckon. Dragged us under. I managed to free the line, else this float would be down there, too. See anything?"

"Over there . . ." Hector pointed, and went straight into the water, like a fish, before Quarry had seen. Then he saw a limp, pink something, spread-eagled, and Hector's bow-wave sweeping up to it, then sweeping back. Quarry knelt, reaching. It was Maria, and frighteningly still. Inboard, Quarry saw there was a bruise on her forehead, but she was breathing strongly, and began to struggle as they laid her down.

"No more worms on me," Hector panted. "Better check her over, while I look out for the others . . . for Downey, anyway . . ." Quarry knelt, as Maria began to sit up.

"Hold still," he ordered.

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"You've had a crack on the head . . . but can you feel any discomfort anywhere else?" She lay still, her green eyes wide, then she winced, and made it into a smile, stiffly.

"Look for yourself," she said, and wriggled over on her face. "Is not ladylike to talk about such things . . ." but he had seen already, and was in no mood to think about lady-like behavior, or otherwise. Three worms were at work on her, and he swung the lamp to shrivel them. Two in the small of her back snapped their tails and fell free. He swept them into the water with a quick hand, the while he kept the lamp steady on the third, which was fastened into the soft flesh of her buttock. "This might hurt a bit," he warned, digging his fingers into her back. As with Hector, the wounds were soft, and bleeding. But the third clung defiantly, even though its tail withered and shrivelled. Quarry set his teeth. He pressed his finger-tips hard either side of that black head, and the blood welled up, so that his grip slipped, and Maria winced.

"That hurts," she said, angrily. "What's the game, eh?"

"It's going to hurt a damn sight more, honey, if I don't get that head out of there." He caught a side-glance of Malt's face, close and staring. "Here!" he said, roughly, "hold this, shine it on here." To Maria, he said, "Hold on to your dignity, now, because this is going to hurt like hell." Wiping the blood away from the rounded flesh, so that he could get a clear view, he put his face down, his mouth to the wound, and dug his teeth in. He could feel her snap taut, but she held still, and silent. It was an odd sensation, but, within seconds, he could feel a hard lump, like a nut. Clenching his teeth on it, he dragged back. And it came free. Instantly, he lifted his face, and spat the offending thing into the water. Then, with his mouth open, he turned to Malt, shut his eyes, and gestured.

"That was a hell of a thing to do," Hector breathed. "You might have got a bite in the lip, or swallowed the damn thing!"

"Didn't, anyway," Quarry grunted, wiping the blood from his face. "All right, honey, you can come back to normal now," and he slapped Maria, gently, in the most handy place. "It's all over." She turned over, gingerly, and sat, hunched on one side, staring at him with a strange look on her face. Then her lip trembled, and she put a hand to her face.

"It is not enough to say thank you," she whispered. "But what else can I say? And you understand, I could never tell anybody about this, could I?"

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"A secret, between us," he grinned, and was pleased to see a smile come back to her face. This girl had courage of a kind he had never seen before. There was nothing blind, or ignorant, or fanatic, about it, but sheer inner strength.

I WONDER where Downey is?" Hector growled, daring to stand up on the uneasy foothold. The answer came with shocking certainty. From out there, in the gloom, came the harsh, awkward scream of a man angry, agonized, and frightened, all at once. Hector bent his knees to dive, and Quarry gripped his ankle.

"Don't be a damned fool, man. That was all of twenty feet away, and look!" he cast the beam of the lamp over the water, and it came alive with little pinpoint glows of eyes, snapping and darting. "You left a trail of blood for them. You'd be eaten alive in the first ten feet . . ."

"But we can't just sit here . . ." Hector snarled, and stopped, as a sudden muttering rumble hushed his words. Everything seemed to slow down. Quarry had the dream-like sense that time had stopped in its tracks. The rippling water bulged up, glassily smooth, then sagged back into a hollow. Then it leaped into the air in a spout, massively, slowly, hugely . . . and out of the spout came a single slam of noise that hit like a blow, stunning his eardrums. On the instant, he fell flat, grabbing the edge of the float, throwing the other arm across Maria, his only coherent thought a hope that they would not have to go into that water, again.

A great wave took the piece of plastic, threw it high, slapped it down in the water again with a smash, and rolled on, leaving them bobbing and swaying, stunned and staring at each other.

"I'm beginning to feel like you," Hector mumbled, shaking his head as if to get out the ringing noises. "Cardan was the lucky one, to get it over with. We can't take much more."

"The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away," Malt said, numbly. "Good Lord, deliver us, if it be Thy will . . ." Quarry got up to his knees, shakily, and realized that he had been squashing himself on the hard metal of the 'point'. And it was still functioning. Mockingly. As if saying 'I'm willing, if you are'. Maria lay still, only her eyes moving. Beside her, Nancy Rogers had relapsed into unconsciousness. What now, he thought, helplessly, what now?

Brand and Downey were gone, that was certain. The truck must have flooded, or collapsed, under the weight of water. And the ex-

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plosion would have ended Downey, even if he hadn't been as good as dead, anyway. So they were adrift, in the middle of a lake, without anything at all. His mind kept circling back to the explosion, fumbling and falling over it. Explosion. Shock. Shock-wave. He stirred, crept to the edge of the float, peered at the water. Then he went to nudge Hector.

"Check me," he muttered, "but I'd say that shock killed or stunned just about everything that swims in this water . . ."

"That figures," Hector nodded, dully, then his face livened. And then dulled again. Quarry swallowed, tried to think over the ringing in his ears.

"You reckon, if we got over the side and pushed, we could beach this thing, and get ashore, on our feet?" Hector looked at him, and frowned.

"It's worth a try." He got to his feet, but Quarry halted him, went to kneel by Maria. She sat up, wide-eyed.

"Take the 'point', here, he said. "Keep the two needles on the center-line, like this." He moved it, felt her shoulder warm against his arm as he swung it round. "That way, see? Now, me and Hector will get in the water and push. You guide us. Sing out if we get off the line. All right?" He left her, crawled across to Hector, indicated the direction, and they slid over the side together.

The water was warm, and thick with slimy things, so that his flesh cringed, but he set his teeth, began to kick out. By his side, Hector did the same.

YOU feel so much as a nibble," he puffed. "You shout, good and loud, and get out, fast." He blew, put his head under, and kicked, pushing with his arms. He swam, and swam, lifting for breath and ducking under, until the whole world shrank to the narrow confines of warm water, spray in his nose, and the hard edge of plastic pressing against his hands. Everything else became darkness, and the soul-consuming ache, and urge, to let go, to slide, and fall, into restful quiet. It would be so pleasant, just to give up. Then, out of the warm velvet blackness a sharp, knife-like pain struck into the calf of his leg. Fine time to get a cramp, he thought, wearily. Then his clouded senses sharpened into anxious life, and he threw his head up, slapped an urgent hand on Hector's shoulder.

"Out!" he gasped. "Out, quick! I'm bit. The holiday is over!" he dragged himself on to his stomach, looked back. Hector stared, dull-eyed. "Come on! he put a crackling edge on his voice. "Get moving, damn you!" Sob-

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bing for breath, he slithered to safety, and got his fingers to the worm, while Hector levered himself, soggily, out of the water, and lay down, with a sigh. Quarry stared at him, knowing just how he felt. Then, making an effort, he got to his knees and crept to Maria.

"How did we do?" he croaked, and she pointed. There, ahead, just visible, were flickering glowing columns. fifteen yards, maybe . . . and they'd be safe! He re-read his own thoughts, and killed a threatening giggle. Safe! Still, it would be a shade better than being adrift on open water, to starve. Then he caught a glimpse of her arm. It was spotted with bright red scars. He caught her wrist, looked at the other arm, which cradled the 'point'. Same marks. He looked close, and they were little circles, oozing blood.

"How'd you get those?" he demanded, harshly. She hesitated, then,

"I was paddling. You know, like a dog. I wanted to help. They don't hurt much, and you can shake them off easily, if you're quick."

"That's just great," he groaned. "You idiot! Shake them off! D'you think they're all little ones? Where would you have been if you'd come across a big one, big enough to swallow your arm at a gulp, eh?"

"I was helping," she said, mutinously. "You were all the way in the water. Suppose a big one swallowed you?"

"That's a chance we had to take. Oh, what the hell . . . you did right, I suppose. Sorry. And it's an idea, too. We can all do it. Not you, though, not while you have that 'point'. You sit still. It's about time Malt earned his keep." He dragged himself about the weary business of organizing their strength, he and Malt at either side, and Hector up front, and they leaned over, on the sharp edges, and paddled. Wearily, splashingly, but they moved. And they bumped, at long last, on something solid.

IT'S a rock, or root, or something," Quarry sighed, exhaustedly. "We can get off, anyway, if we're careful. And there are trees ahead. Ladies first . . . if you can slap some life into Miss Rogers. She'll have to make it on her own steam." He fretted as Maria worked on her dazed and shivering companion. Hector went first, carefully along the leathery bump, to stand and hold out a hand. Miss Rogers went on her knees. Maria followed, carrying the instrument, with Quarry holding his breath. Then Malt, also unashamedly crawling. Quarry went last, achingly aware of his unsteadiness, and knowing that the others felt the same.

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They needed food and rest, above everything else, and the chances of either were very slim. He had a pack of vit-enz in either pocket; they had one U.V. lamp; and the 'point' . . . and that was all. He joined them, where they had huddled by the bole of a huge tree which gave off a hot orange glow. They were a sorry looking party. Even the mighty Hector was slumped, despondently, and Nancy Rogers seemed to be in a blank trance, just staring into nothingness. Quarry eyed her, uneasily. He had seen this kind of state once or twice before, among the men who came back from outbases. As M'Grath had said, you can push a person just so far, and then something has to break. M'Grath . . . Lord, how long ago and far away all that seemed, now.

"Soon as we've had a bit of a blow," he said, "we have to push on, and hope we find something to eat. The longer we go without, the less chance we have. Let's get moving. Maria, I'll take that 'point', if you like . . . ?"

"It is all right" she said. "It gives me something to think about."

"Just as you like, only don't lose it. Damned if I'd trust it to anybody else, that's for sure. Which way, now?" and he leaned over, as she steadied the instrument. Her hair was now in short damp curls, close to her head. They brushed his face as he peered. "Got yourself a new hairstyle" he murmured. "It makes you look Greek. You should keep it like that."

"Is appropriate" she smiled. "My mother was Greek."

THEY began to trudge, he and Maria abreast, Malt leading Miss Rogers, and Hector plodding heavily in the rear. Underfoot, the top layer was wet, spongy moss, for an inch or so, but firm enough, below that. By degrees, Quarry felt his way into a dragging step that minimized the wrenching slips, and spurred himself to look about for a certain type of tree-bush. He would know it, if he saw it, but it didn't glow, and was well-nigh indescribable to the others. Ahead, the colorful gloom stretched on into dim distance.

"It's as if the Earth-type apple, pear and plum had all got together and co-operated to fight the fungus" he said, trying to explain. "Queer-looking thing, mushy, and no great size, but all right to eat."

"There are no native fruits, then?"

"Not that anybody has found. You see, the fungus makes it almost impossible for anything to grow a skin, or rind. How are the bites?"

"They are comfortable," she said, thoughtfully. "This is a

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strange, and a wonderful place, in some ways. Even the heat . . . is not too bad, for me. I like the heat." He snorted, and she heard it. "Why did you do that?"

"You broke another illusion," he said, grinning. "I've been thinking of you as tough, and with plenty of guts, because you're still pretty chipper, when the rest of us are just about dead on our feet. Now it turns out that you just like the heat!"

"I'm sorry," she said, meekly. "You are thinking about me quite a lot . . ."

"I have all sorts of other things to think about, too, not nearly so nice. Hold still a minute . . ." he caught her arm. "Listen . . ." and they heard the far-off plash of falling water. He swung his head, to line it up. "It's a bit off course . . . but if that's a water-tree, it's worth it. Come on!" he waved the rest of them to follow.

The tree stood all alone, close by a narrow neck of the still water, and the sound of splashing grew loud as they came near. Now Quarry realized how thirsty he was, how the constant heat was robbing them all of water, even though they were greasy with sweat all the time.

"Drink all you can hold," he advised. "It may be a long time to the next," and he set them an example by standing under the water and letting it soak him, inside and out. Just that, by itself, was refreshing. His mind began to stretch and work, again. Maria, coming close in the spray, looked at him.

"You are worried," she said, positively. "Always worried, but more than usual, now. There is some trouble, maybe?"

"You have sharp eyes," he said, and stooped to kick off his shorts. Then, squatting, he set about trying to tear the rugged material into strips. "To make a carrier for the 'point'" he explained. "A pity you girls got rid of those shirts you had. Would have been handy."

"You evade," she said, opening her mouth to the water, and blowing it in a thin stream. "There is something wrong, yes?"

"All right. It's like this. We must be within twenty-five miles or so of Prime Base. Must be. And I don't recall any big body of water, not this big, or yet any grove of trees . . . not this close."

"But you said no-one had been more than five miles . . . ?"

"On foot, sure. But we've done a lot of aerial survey. An echo can tell the difference between water, rock, and trees. Of course, we might have missed this bit. It's possible." She took another mouthful of water. Then, "Why is there no rock surface, like on Earth? No mountains . . . ?"

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"You're not thinking, now," he told her. "Look, even on Earth, you find moss and lichen, even flowers, right up into the zones where it's too cold for anything to grow, almost. Here, there isn't any cold, at all, and the air is full of life, of micro-organisms that can eat just about anything. There is one kind of rocky outcrop that is almost proof against the fungus, but it's rare. A sort of glassy stuff, like obsidian. There's one big slab of it right over the polar point, and that's why Prime Base is built there, as a matter of fact. Pure luck . . ."

STOP! "Quarry, look out!" the frantic cry came from Malt. Quarry snapped erect, staring. Nancy Rogers was about to leap at him like a cat. He had a flashing glimpse of splayed fingers, and her twisted, snarling face.

"You . . . !" she said, harshly. "You got us into this, didn't you, you . . ." and she recited his past, present and future in language he would have sworn she didn't know. He backed off, his whole body ready to duck and run. What the devil did you do with a mad woman? He caught a glimpse of Malt, and Hector coming up on the other side. They looked as helpless as he felt.

"Murderer!" she screeched, making a threatening swipe with her claws. "You're only half a man. There's only one good man out of the pack of you . . ." and she rolled her eyes aside, to Malt, who cringed. With startling suddenness, she broke her crouch and ran for Malt. Quarry snatched for her, too late, and stumbled. When he could see again, she was away, running like a deer, and Malt fairly flying in terror in front of her. Quarry groaned.

"Come on . . ." he waved Hector, "we've got to catch them, before we all get lost." He began to run, with Hector pounding heavily beside him. "Watch your footing. Stay in their tracks. Damn fool trick . . . running . . . in this . . ." he panted. From ahead, from the wavering pink shadow that was Nancy Rogers, there came a wild cackle of laughter, and then a sudden wavering scream. Quarry felt the underfoot give way, so that he was ankle deep, and then up to his knees, and he slowed to a stop. Now he could see Miss Rogers, up to her waist, still struggling forward, paying no heed to Malt, now. He was over to her right, and also waist deep, but struggling to turn back. Making a snap decision, Quarry threw himself flat on his face in the ooze and paddled, strongly, towards Malt.

"Don't fight it," he called. "Lie down. Try to float. Spread your load." He slid forward, feeling the slime creep up over his shoul-

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ders. Malt was still flapping, trying to turn, and sinking deeper all the time. Quarry raised his head. "Lie down, you damned fool!" he yelled, and shoved forward again. He reached and touched something which flailed and then fastened on to his wrist. Hanging on, he tried to back up, and his head went under. Ooze surged up over his shoulders, into his ears, and he fought, frantically, to get his head out, to get a breath. That clutch on his wrist was like a vise, and a dead weight. Heaving, he got his head free for a moment, spat and sucked in a huge breath, then, as he kicked back, he went under again. Warm sludge enfolded him, clinging and holding. Lights flashed in his head as his breath began to burn in his throat. Slime crept up his nostrils, nibbled at his tight-pressed lips. And he could hold on no longer. A strangling fire seared his throat. Then merciful darkness.

HE WOKE to water splashing in his face and a foul taste in his mouth. He coughed, painfully, and moved his head, to realize it was resting on something warm and soft.

"Lie still, now," Maria said, gently. "You had a close call."

"Thought I'd had it, altogether," he choked. "What happened . . . the others?"

"You keep still," she repeated, and he realized his head was resting on her lap. "The padre will be all right, soon. When he comes round. You had him in a death-grip. We could hardly separate you."

"We?"

"Hector and me. I managed to grab your ankles . . . and he held mine . . . and, anyway, you're all right, now."

"And Miss Rogers?"

"She wanted to die, that one, I think. We couldn't get anywhere near her, in time. Poor girl. Possibly, it was better, like that. She was . . . not right in the head, at the last. She was singing . . ." he could hear the ragged edge in her voice, and knew that she was fighting a strain.

"M'Grath told me a bit about that kind of thing," he muttered. "Pavlov did the original experiments on it, I gather. You can strees an organism just so far, and then it goes into a blank area, as if all the learning, the conditioning, was washed out."

He rolled his head aside, out of the spray, opened his eyes, and sat up, with an effort that made him groan. "Where's the 'point'?" he asked, and she put a hand to her side.

"I have it, all safe."

HE SAT, sagging, then fought his way to his feet. Off to

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one side, Hector was working on Malt. He looked up, grinned, and sat back on his haunches.

"He'll be all right, in a while. Not as bad as you. He never went under, at all. But you . . . brother, were you full of mud! All right, now?"

"You could call it that." Quarry tried to copy the grin, but his face wouldn't stretch to it. He felt empty, unsteady, and raw all over. But he could still stand. He even managed to lend a hand to drag Malt clear of the rain-fall, up to a firm slope, where they could look down, in the colorful gloom, to the water-tree and the neck of quiet water. Maria, squatting by the three men, was busy with the rags of his shorts, twisting them into a single strand. She had managed to keep the waist-band intact, joining the pockets. Now she was securing the 'point' by one pocket, and the lamp by the other. What a woman, he thought! Steel-wire and leather, all through. Plus looks, and a shape. How the hell had anyone as fine as this managed to drift into the phoney world of T.V. fakery?

"There!" she said, making the last knot. "It is not elegant, but it will serve. Who will wear it, eh?"

"We'll take turns," Quarry said, and looked at her with admiration.

Malt gave a sigh that was almost a sob. He tried to sit up, but Quarry pushed him back.

"Just lie still," he said. "Take it easy." Malt sagged back, and lay still. Quarry looked around at the pseudo-peaceful scene, and sighed. Then, forcing a briskness he didn't feel, he tapped Hector on the arm.

"I'm as empty as a drum," he said, "And you must be the same. We'd better scout round for something to eat. This is a likely place for fruit."

"Both of us?" Hector queried, and Quarry nodded his appreciation.

"That's all right. Maria can look after herself every bit as well as we can. And we can use the noise of the water as a homing guide. You go that way, I'll go this. Never mind the big trees, the shining ones. Keep an eye out for something small and twisted, about so high. If there's any fruit on it, it will be grey colored, and sticky on the outside . . ."

He set off, until the splashing was barely audible, then cast in a great circle, stumbling among the tree-boles, slithering on treacherous mud-patches, and found nothing. He kept on, desperately, feeling his energy draining away, and his legs shivering with the effort to keep on. At last, feeling sure he'd completed a semi-circle, and still empty-handed, he put his face to

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the water-noise, and began shambling back. And then he found what he'd been looking for. A whole clump of twisted, gnarled bushes, huddling round the base of a huge column that blazed green fire. The thumb-thick branches were sticky with sap, and bent under the weight of their fruit. Repellent grey, it was, and shaped like a nightmare version of a pear, but dripping with juice. Even though he knew they were edible and pleasant, he had to force himself to pull one. It squished in his hand, and the juice dribbled over his chin as he bit into it. But it was good, and not too unlike the pear it resembled, in taste.

He spat out the stone in the middle, pulled another, and his stomach growled. Then, taking a bearing on the water-noise, he set off at a shambling trot.

ALL at once a huge note, throbbingly powerful, like the boom of a mighty organ pipe, struck his ear, and he skidded to an unbelieving stop. From dead ahead, from what he'd been thinking of as 'camp' . . . but what? Like nothing he'd ever heard, or heard of, it reverberated through the columnar trees, steady and clear. He picked up his feet and ran. The great tone cut off, and came again on a higher pitch. Then he heard, over it, the stomach-catching shrillness of Maria's scream, and he flung himself into a gallop. Breaking from the gloom at the top of the slope, he went slithering down, peering.

Malt sat quite still, just beyond the edge of the water-spray, like a wax image. Maria had backed away, up the slope. Both were staring, fixedly, at what had come up out of the narrow arm of water. Quarry felt sick as he saw it. Huge, yellowish-pink, heaving and shapeless, with stringy tendrils radiating in all directions from the central, surging, soggy mass. A jelly-fish, he thought, and then, as he came closer, he saw that it had a hide, that the tendrils slithered in and out through slits, that it had a ring of mouths, opening and shutting at random around the mid-way jump that was its body. And this was what was making the organ note.

Maria heard him come slithering down the slope. She turned and ran to him, blindly, holding out her arms. He grabbed her, tight, staring over her heaving shoulder. The thing came on, steadily, and Malt just sat there, paralyzed.

GIMME that lamp," he choked. "I never saw anything like this before, but I have to try to stop it," and he went down the slope, fearfully, clutching the lamp, sweat running into his eyes

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as that great tone thundered. Behind him, Maria screamed again, and the beast stopped its note. Mouths opened and shut, sickeningly, and then it gave off a scream . . . the exact copy of Maria's voice, but much stronger. Quarry clung to his slipping sanity, and aimed the lamp, as he came up to Malt's shoulder. The thing was less than a yard away, its lamp-eyed tendrils questing towards the two men. The scream cut off, and it began to pipe a series of notes, up and down the frequency range, as if seeking something.

"Snap out of it!" Quarry grated, giving Malt a nudge, and holding the lamp steady on the advancing bulk. He caught his breath as the padre's body fell, sideways, lifelessly, and sprawled. He stooped to take hold, and the creature suddenly lurched forward, all of a mass, the leading tendrils grabbing Malt's body. Quarry fell back, scrambling to get to his feet, lifting the lamp and thumbing it. But the thing took no notice, at all. Even the little glowing eyes at its tendril-tips didn't glow any brighter. Horrified, Quarry turned the lamp on his own face, and realized that it was burned out. Useless.

He tossed it away, and crouched, impotently, striving to think what to do next. The thing could move quickly, when it wanted to. That 'singing' . . . as if it was trying to talk to him. Waiting for him to run, maybe. Then it would jump him, the way it had jumped Malt. There was no sign of him, now. Maybe he'd been already dead, of fright. Better, that way. And it kept right on coming, slowly, sounding off piping . . .

From his back there burst a clear soprano note, strong and full-throated, leaping up the scale with confident bravura. Then it went into an aria, strong and melodic. Part of his mind independently identified the melody. 'Cara nomé . . .' he thought, and wondered, while the rest of him, helplessly, watched the weird beast suddenly halt, its tendrils falling slack and still, its many mouths opening and closing as it strove to match that cascade of sound. Maria sang on, firm and defiant, pouring her all into the leaping trills and flourishes of the aria, while the grotesque jelly-like thing lost its yellow tinge and flushed an angry red. Frustration, Quarry thought, his mind reeling with the insane idea. But it seemed to be the answer, for all that.

Flaring bright red, and awkward in its haste, the thing gathered itself and retreated, down the slope, leaving a trail of glowing slime, and into the water. Quarry sagged to the ground right where he stood, and gasped

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with the reaction. Then, lifting his head, as Maria stopped singing, he turned, to see her kneeling, her face in her hands, and Hector come running from the trees. Quarry got up, and staggered back to her, where she crouched, silently. Hector came tramping up.

"What happened?" he panted. "I got lost, back there. Then I heard that booming noise. Couldn't make out what it was. Then Maria, singing, and I headed for that, quick. What was it, and where's the padre?"

"A jelly-fish came up out of the water, and frightened him to death." Quarry could hear the quaver in his own voice. "It's the truth. Then Maria sang to it, and it went away. That's what I saw, and I don't give a damn if you don't believe it. I can hardly believe it, myself. A syren luring lesser creatures into its maw. But it met its match, this time." Hector looked at him, shook his head, and sighed.

"This is a queer place, all right. Did you find anything to eat?"

"Good for you," Quarry grunted. "You keep your mind on the main track, all the time, don't you? What we need, right now. Yes, I found a bush, back that way. Come on, let's eat . . ." and he stooped to nudge Maria, gently. She got up without a word, and they went back to the fruit.

"YOU sure these are all right to eat?" Hector demanded, looking at the repulsive mass in his hand. But he changed his attitude when he'd had a taste. With the first mouthful, and the pleasure of swallowing, they lost their reluctance and ate, ravenously, careless of the juice which dribbled over their hands and faces.

"Better . . ." Hector said, at last, sighing and leaning back on the moss. "I feel a bit more human, now. Pity we can't take some of this with us."

"I suggest," Quarry said, studying the 'point', and frowning at the way the two needles were sticking, "that we rest here awhile. Drink, eat, and get some sleep, in relays, and then push on. It's all we can do."

"You reckon we have a chance, at all?"

"I told you, before, we never did have a chance, right from the word go. We've been lucky, this far, believe me!" Maria lifted her head, at that.

"I don't understand what you mean," she said. "This is lucky?"

"We crashed, and only Cardan was killed. Graves injured. We had a truck that kept going a lot longer than we had any right to expect. We have a guide, a pointer. We've found water, twice, and food. We've only met a few predators, and one lot of insects. And we've had trees most of the way.

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That, for this place, is luck. In the first two years of Prime Base, eighteen first-class men went out scouting, just round the base, and never came back. And nobody knows what happened to them. Why d'you think Richter didn't want you on his conscience? This is no place for people, and never will be."

"It's tough, all right," Hector nodded, then, with a glance down, he raised a big hand to his lips, and gestured. Maria had sagged, and was now curled up, with her head on one arm, fast asleep. "You'd better do the same," the big man said, quietly. "I'll go wash and drink, and be right back. You curl up."

"All right," Quarry stretched himself out. "Don't take any fool chances, now. At the first sign of drowsiness, you call me."

HE HAD no idea how long he slept, but he was stiff, aching, and hoarse, when Hector shook him. Maria's arm lay warmly across his chest, and he moved it gently, as he sat up, and stretched, looked round.

"Nothing new," Hector yawned. "A few noises. Sounded like somebody singing, a long way off, one time." Quarry yawned in his turn.

"Could have been our jelly-fish friend come back. I'll go get a splash, and then you stretch out."

Ten minutes later, Hector was breathing heavily, while Quarry squatted, sucking on one of the fruits, and thinking. It was crazy, how it had all worked out. No rhyme or reason to it, that he could see. After a while, he heard Maria shift and stir. She sat up, shivering, despite the sheen of sweat on her skin.

"It is real, after all," she whispered. "I thought, maybe it is all a bad dream, but no. They are all gone. Only we three are left."

"I was thinking about that," he murmured. "If I'd been asked to guess who was the most likely to make out, I'd never have picked us. Well, Hector, maybe, but not you, or me. You, a woman . . . pampered, famous . . . above the rough stuff. Me, a nobody. The others . . . they'd all done this kind of thing before. I'd have picked them to pull through, if anybody. It doesn't make sense . . . there's no point to it, this way." She sat, cuddling her knees, thinking. Then,

"I think it does make a sense, of a kind. You said it, yourself, about being committed to something to the point where it kills you. The others were like that. They were living *for* something, for some idea, some reason . . . but not for themselves. Not just for living, for itself. You see?"

"That makes sense, in a way," he agreed, grudgingly, "but . . ."

"Why are you so unwilling?"

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she asked, softly. "You don't want to accept your own values. Why is that?"

"I suppose it's because I've always run into the other kind. I've never met anybody who thinks the way I do, so, naturally, that makes me wrong. Doesn't it? I mean, only a crazy man would think that *he* was right, and everybody else was wrong. Wouldn't he?" She nodded her head, crooking it to one side, then got up, went to the bush and pulled a fruit for herself, and one for him.

"It is not quite an apple," she said, handing it to him, "and I am not Eve, but I ask you. Forget the 'right' and the 'wrong'. You do what is right for you. It may be all wrong for other people . . . but you are not other people. You are you. And I don't even know your name . . . Mr. Quarry."

"Call me Andy," he said. "I never thought of it that way. I've always gone my own road. Kidded myself it took a certain amount of courage to do just that, too. But I never really believed in myself, not the way you mean. Just thought I was queer, that's all. But, if it comes to being genuine, why aren't you a singer. You have a wonderful voice!"

I HAVE a voice. I have had training, even. But it is not wonderful. I went to drama school. I can act. But that is not wonderful, either. Just so-so . . . what they call 'not bad'. But I have a shape, ah! That is good. It makes the men drool. For this, I can get big money. For singing, a pittance. So I sell my outside, for men to look at, to drool over, for women to go green. I get good money. My singing, that is for me, inside. That I do not sell."

"They drool, all right," Quarry grinned. "I've seen 'em. I've seen all your tapes. But, like we were saying, isn't that the easy way out?"

"You think it is easy, to prostitute myself, to pretend? I make movements, faces, suggestions, and I shrink, inside. It is not easy, never to be able to talk to anyone, not even another woman, the way I am talking to you, now. You do not drool. You talk to me as if I was another man, I think. That is why I said . . . I like you, Andy," and she put a hand on his arm. He looked down at her hand, at the strong fingers. Then, to her face.

"You start that kind of thing," he warned, gruffly, "and I'm likely to start drooling, just like all the rest."

"But no!" she laughed. "Not like them. You warn me, first. You play fair, according to rules."

He stood up and stretched.

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"It's about time we got moving." Then laughed and added, "anything to get off this dangerous topic."

Maria woke Hector while Quarry picked up the 'point' and shook it. The needles were stuck. He tapped it, turned it, and they came free, momentarily. He turned, carefully, got an angle. He pointed, and they began to move, in a steady trudge.

"Use your eyes all you can," he advised. "This thing is just about done for, and we may have to go on sheer judgement. So long as the trees hang out, we can sight a track, after a fashion."

AFTER a dragging, wearying hour of trudging, in the slithering mud, there were signs of the mist. It grew thicker, until they could barely make out the tree-boles as they came to them. Quarry called a halt.

"Been trying to save you from this," he muttered, "but the 'point' has been dead for some time, now. All we know is, we're headed the right way, as of now. But we can't see a thing for this damned rainbow soup."

"So what can we do?" Maria asked, quietly.

"Keep on going, is all. Hector, you're left-handed, aren't you?"

"That's right. Why?"

"Because a man walks in a circle, when he's walking blind. But if we spread out, you on one side, me on the other, Maria in the middle it ought to compensate for it, a bit. We can't afford to miss a thing, now."

They went on, wearily, with Maria singing, softly, in the middle. It was an eerie, desolate sensation, staggering on into hot wet mist, of all colors, over slimy wet sponge, with strange boomings and pipings on all sides, with Maria nothing more than a voice and a dim shadow, to his right, and nobody knew what, everywhere else. Delirium must be like this, he thought, lifting each foot as if it was a weight, putting it forward with effort, dragging the other one, until the very act of walking became a life in itself, and balance was a meaningless, senseless thing. Time came to a stop, and the universe was nothing more than wet, hot fog.

Until, suddenly, the glowing mist in front of him went dark, and then as black as night. He stopped, stood swaying, rubbing his eyes. Then, cautiously, he went forward, with his hands out, to reach and touch a smooth, glass-hard wall of rock. He called out.

"Me, too!" Maria called back. From further away, Hector announced that he'd found the wall, also. They came together. A wall. A cliff?

"Now what?" Hector sham-

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bled into view, and leaned against the blackness. Around them, unseen blue things piped and fluted. Quarry put his back to the wall and slid down to sit. The other two copied him.

"This . . ." he said, "is good, and bad, at the same time. This is, for sure, the edge of the rock outcrop that Prime Base is built on. Can't be anything else. It's a rough circle, and it's no more than nine miles across, at its biggest. Prime is bang in the middle, and is all of half-a-mile radius. So we're closer than we thought, and all we have to do is get up there, and we're home."

"Sure, but how?" Hector sighed. "This is like glass. We haven't got sticky feet."

"That's the bad part, all right. All we can do is feel our way along, and hope there's a break, or ledges, or something. Come on . . ." and he led off, with one hand stretched out to the wall. His foot caught in something, and he kicked it away.

Then his sluggish wits did a double-take, and he halted, went back, calling a warning to others. It couldn't have been a creeper, or a root, not here. He found it again, and it was what he'd thought. A line. The twin of the one that had gone down with the truck. He saw Maria, dimly.

"CATCH hold of this," he said, "while I reef in the slack. Unless I'm crazy, this is, or was, somebody's life-line." The end he was hauling on came taut, angling up into the darkness. "That's what I thought," he muttered. "Try the other end . . ." and a coil grew at his feet as he heaved it in. There was something, not very heavy, on the end. "Better not look," he advised Maria. "Lord knows how long this has been here." The 'thing' proved to be a pair of shorts, thick-grown with moss. He freed the line from the belt-straps, and picked at the unpleasant relic with unwilling fingers, but there was no mark to indicate previous ownership.

"We'll never know who he was," he said, grimly, "but he's given us our lift. The other end of the line is still fast. We ought to be able to go up." The song-pipers had stilled their calling, some time ago. Maria looked down at the line, and shivered.

"I wonder what happened to him?"

"That's something else we'll never know," Quarry muttered. Hector came near.

"Let me go up," he said. "I reckon I can climb that, and I can haul you up, if there's anything like a ledge, up there."

"All right," Quarry agreed. "Sure is more in your line than mine. But don't take any chances." Hector grinned, rubbed his hands together, and took a trip

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on the line, yanking it hard. It held firm. Shifting his grip, he moved in to the wall, put his foot up, and leaned back. Steadily, hand over hand, he began to walk up. Quarry, steadying the dangling end, watched him, and his arms ached in sympathy. Muscles or not, Hector couldn't keep that up for long, not after what they had been through. The line jumped and swayed, all there was to show that the big man was still going. At a guess, he must have gone twenty feet up by the time the line stilled and went slack.

"All right?" Quarry called, anxiously.

"Fine!" came the call from above. "A ledge . . . sort of cave . . . tell Maria to catch hold, and I'll hoist!"

"You heard what the man said." Quarry turned to her, gathering up the slack. "Hold still a moment, and I'll sling you a bight to sit in." He fashioned the tie, showed her how to sit in it, and jerked the line, as a signal.

"Haul away!" he called, and watched her go up, jerkily, kicking at the wall with her feet. Then, about a foot beyond his head, she stopped, swinging helplessly. Getting a breather, Quarry guessed. Then, with no warning at all, she fell, and Quarry barely had time to brace himself in a futile effort to break her fall. Flat on the wet moss, with all the wind knocked out of him, he struggled to get up, to squirm free of her weight. By a lesser miracle, he hadn't broken anything.

"You hurt?" he gasped, getting to his knees and pawing through a tangle of line to touch her. She groaned, sat up, shook her head.

"I'm all right . . . I think . . ." she said. "What . . .?" and the question died in her throat as the air above them was rent by a harsh, scraping screech . . . like nothing he had ever heard before. The hairs prickled on his neck as he peered up. The screech came again, hoarse, like a nail on glass, setting his teeth on edge. Then a wild cry from Hector, and a grunt of effort, and the thrashing of a mighty struggle. Quarry got up, put his hand to the line, and Maria clutched his ankle.

"No, no!" she gasped. "You can't . . ."

"I can. I've got to. Hector's run into something, up there. He's in trouble . . ." he kicked her hand away, gripped the line, and leaned back, testing his grip. As he did so, there was a despairing shout, the line was wrenched from his grasp and a scrambling mass fell heavily, soddenly, into the moss, right in front of his face. He staggered back a step, then forward, took a

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look, and his stomach heaved. By his side, Maria screamed, bit her hand and screamed again. Ignoring her, and fighting to keep his last meal down, Quarry snatched at a loop of line, wielded it like a whip, and slashed, viciously, at the grey-white, many legged thing that was wrapped, snake-like, round Hector's limp body. The fall had burst it, crippled it, but its ropy limbs were still writhing, reaching, even as it bled stinking green ichor. Quarry slashed at it, retching and sweating, flailing it with the line until there was nothing left to writhe, nothing but a mass of torn and oozing pulp.

THEN he knelt, took Hector's arm, to lift and drag him clear of the evil-smelling mass. He saw that Hector was still gripping, in each hand, a snake-like tentacle. They had been ripped bodily from the carcass. But that fall had done its work. There was a dark stain at the corner of Hector's mouth as he tried to grin, to talk.

"Only one . . ." he gasped. "A cave . . . came out and tried to drag me . . . in there. . . all right, now . . . tell Maria . . . sorry . . ." but he was never to say what he had to be sorry about. Quarry knelt quite still, and there were unashamed tears in his eyes. He knuckled them away, roughly, head bowed.

"You're not half as sorry as I am, big man," he whispered. The others had been just names and faces, but he'd grown to know and like Hector. A real person, just as Maria had said, and in the same sense. He got up, slowly, touched her on the arm, and she raised her face, sadly.

"He was a good man," she said, simply. "I never knew him to do harm to anybody. A good man." Quarry knew how she felt. He gathered the down-hanging line, tugged it, and it was still fast. If Hector was right, and there had been only one of those many-headed snake-things, their way was clear. If not . . . well, there was only one way to find out. He gripped the rope, took a deep breath.

"I'm going up," he said, and she stared, wild-eyed.

"You can't . . . you can't leave me here, all alone . . . with that?"

"I've got to," he said, flatly. "It's the only way. Come on, honey, get a grip on yourself. There isn't much more. Nearly home. Try, now?" She seemed dazed, staring at him. He let go the line, went to her, put out his hand, and she took it. All at once, she was clinging close to him, like a child seeking shelter. He held her, gently, stroking her short hair with a clumsy hand. "It's going to be all right," he

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promised. "I can get as far as that ledge . . . and then you sit in the loop, the way you did before, and I'll pull you up. That's all. Now, you take the end of the line. That way, you'll feel me on the other end." He coaxed her to take the line. Then, again, he took a grip, put his foot to the wall as Hector had done, and began to walk up. It was even harder than he had thought, and the line kept trying to slip through his fingers as he reached for each hold. Cramp struck at his forearms as he gripped and heaved and heaved, and made the ledge with nothing to spare. He fell on to it, heavily, catching a blurred glimpse of the cave. If there'd been another of the snake-things in there, he couldn't have lifted a finger to save himself.

LONG before he wanted to, he got to his knees, crept back to the edge, and called down, tugging on the line. He caught her answer, very faint, and held on. Then she called again, and he began to pull in, until her weight came full on the line. Then, with bursting lungs and string-weak arms, he realized he wasn't going to be able to lift her. Casting round, desperately, he saw the spike of rock that the line was anchored to, and fell on his knees beside it. Hauling taut again, he looped the slack round it, pulled tight, and reached down for a grip. Heaving like mad, he managed to get it to come up, and to take up the new slack. He did it again, and the rock bit into his knees. Again, gaining inches only, but gaining. And again. And just once more. He kept promising himself that 'just once more' until the white of her upturned face showed out of the mist, so that he could reach her hand, and give one last tendon-cracking heave. And she fell in a heap beside him. Then he rolled over on his back, and gave way to breathing, as if it was the only thing left in life. His arms were afire, and he couldn't feel his fingers, at all. He heard her get up, and move away. Then she came back.

"Andy," she said, wearily. "We're not home yet."

"Huh?" he grunted, levering himself up on an elbow. "What d'you mean?"

"There's more cliff. Look!" and he rolled over to look. The black went up still higher. He stared at it, bitterly. Then, getting to his knees, he eyed it again. It seemed to be less black, somehow, up high. He labored to his feet, and shambled over, close, to lean on it and look up.

"The line!" he said, stretching out his hand, and she put the end of the line in his fingers. Fumblingly, like a sleep-walker, he dragged out a loop, and cast it up, over his head. It stayed up

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for awhile, sliding back slowly, then all of a rush. "Edge . . . about ten feet up . . . maybe a shade more," he mumbled. "Might as well be ten thousand, with nothing to hook on to." He let the line fall, and slid to a sitting position, with his back to the wall. And sat there. This, for sure, was the end of the road. After all they'd come through. But that ten-foot height was just too much. She came and sat beside him, silently.

"Well, we nearly made it," he said, as lightly as he could. "Nearly proved me wrong, that time." She put her hand on his knee, gripped it. Her fingers were surprisingly strong.

"You have lost your strength, now," she said, softly, "or you would not say that. You were strong when I was weak. Now, is my turn. We will find a way up. Somehow. Rest for a while. But don't give up, ever!"

HE SAT still, watching the fantastic forms of his imagination in the curling mist, and grinning, wryly, at the mocking fate that had brought him to this pass. Women had never been much in his life. It was funny that he was going to snuff out, at last, along with the only woman he had ever met that he could really admire. Death, of itself, wasn't anything to be scared of. It had to come, sometime. But what a damned silly, pointless way to die. And it was even worse, for her.

"But what fools!" she said, suddenly, lifting her head from where it had been on his shoulder. "Ten feet only! You can stand on my shoulders, Andy. I am strong enough for that, surely?"

"And then what?" he asked, grimly. "I couldn't haul you up, not again. I don't know how the hell I managed that last time, but I certainly couldn't do it again. And there'd be nothing to hang on to, if it is the top. Just moss."

"It would be worth a try. At least . . . one of us would get up."

"You're right!" he said, suddenly interested. "One of us can make it, and that one will be you. You on my shoulders!"

"But no!" she protested, at once. "Never. I will not go, and leave you. In any case, I could not pull myself up, not from just the fingers. I have a strong hand and grip, truly. But not these arms. I will not do it. Never!"

"You're talking like a fool," he said, flatly. "You on my shoulders, and you're away. Safe. That's only right. Who cares about me?"

"I do!" she said, at once, and he caught her hand, angrily.

"Don't say that. You don't want any part of me. I'm not

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your sort. I'm a loner. I don't go with other people, ever."

"Now you talk like a fool!" she snapped. "I will not go, and leave you. There must be another way. For both of us. Or nothing!" and she snapped her jaw on the last word, like a trap. He groaned. Damn crazy female. But just what he would have expected, at that. He had to find some way to persuade her.

"Listen to me!" she said, suddenly. "I think of something."

"Like what?"

"I climb on your shoulders, yes? I get hold of the edge. I have strong fingers. Then . . . you climb up, over me, to the top, and then pull me up. Now?"

"You must be raving mad!" he said, weakly. "I couldn't do that."

"Why not? You think I cannot hold on? I have held on to the things I value, all my life . . . with these . . ." and she spread her hands out, then took his wrist, and gripped, hard. "With this hand . . . I pulled you from the bog, Andy, by the heels." He clutched at his wits, desperately. It was insane, but it might work. It might fail, too, and that would be the end of both of them. A fall, on to this rock. It was too big a chance.

I COULDN'T do it," he said, again. "I couldn't get a grip, anyway. You're as naked as a baby, and greasy with sweat. I couldn't do it." She snorted, and got up, went to the line which lay in great loops.

"Help me to make a harness, of this," she ordered. "Then you will be able to climb, yes?" He looked up at her, and saw the light in her eyes. "Andy . . ." she said, very softly, "I mean this. I will not go, without you, anywhere!" He got up, unsteadily, and caught at the line. She stood quite still, while he fumbled to make some sort of secure tie that would not cut her shoulders too much. At last he had it as best he could manage.

"Stiffen yourself," he warned. "I'm going to bear down," and he put his weight on the loops. She winced, but stood firm. "All right, that's the best I can do. I still don't like this crazy scheme, but you seem hell-bent on it. Ready?" "Yes, I am ready."

He went to the wall, put his back to it, made a cup of his hands, and waited for her. She came close, ignoring his hands, and put her lips to his, swiftly. Then her foot went into his palms and she went up, her knees brushing his ears. He shifted his feet, trying to balance.

"A bit higher," she called, and his arms creaked as he lifted her. Up to his chest, he could manage, and there he stuck. Taking a deep breath, and sinking his knees a bit, he surged up and got his hands up to his head.

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"I can feel a ledge," she called, as the pulse hammered in his ears. "Can you go along a bit . . . to my right . . . a bit more . . . ?" he shifted his feet, heavily, feeling the muscles of his back beginning to complain. Then, suddenly, her weight was gone, and he almost fell. "Now . . . quickly!" she called.

He turned, put his face to the wall, took a deep breath, and reached up, past her toes, to her ankles. He felt her legs stiffen, and press tight together. On his toes, he reached higher, to grip just below her knees. Then, willing himself to pull out everything he had left, he took a firm hold, and heaved. It had to be all in one smooth motion.

He slid face downwards on the soft moss. Quick as a flash, he rolled over, lay flat, and reached for her arms, recklessly squandering the last dregs of his strength. The next moment, she was sprawling on the moss beside him.

"That was . . . a good grip . . ." he panted, and she chuckled, breathlessly.

"I get what I want . . . and I don't let go, ever," she said.

"I still think you're crazy," he muttered. "I don't make promises, and I can't abide strings."

"I know," she said, softly. "I was only trying to frighten you. A joke. I don't want you, with strings, Andy, but just as you are. Like a partnership?"

"You mean that?"

"I mean just that, yes. I wouldn't want you, tied up, like I am, now, but free. And I would be free, too, yes?" He got to his knees, and began unfastening the line. She lay quite still, watching him, until he was done.

"That's it, then," he said, and stood up, holding a hand to help her. "It's all uphill, from here. We can't miss." THE END

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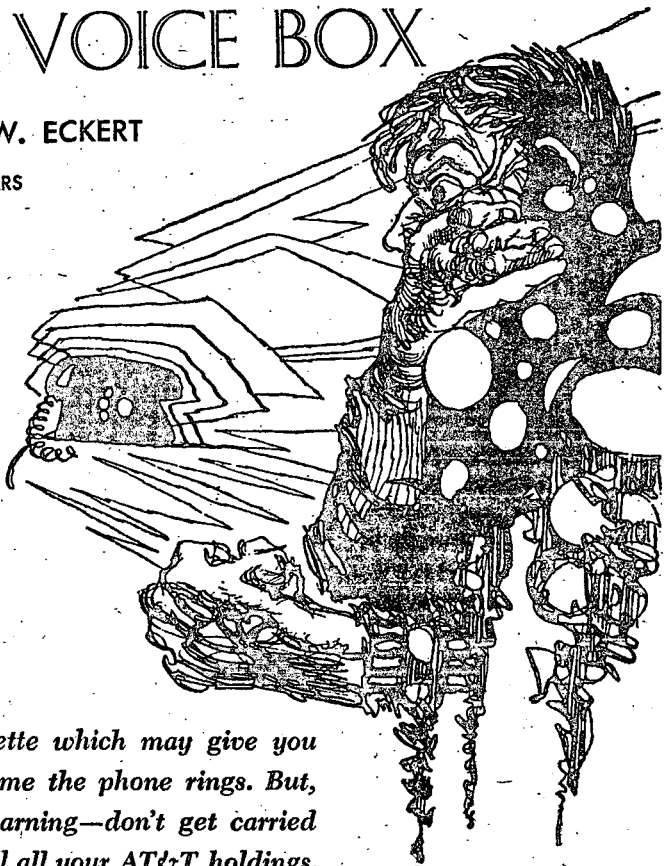
THE VOICE BOX

By ALLAN W. ECKERT

Illustrator SUMMERS



A grim vignette which may give you pause next time the phone rings. But, a word of warning—don't get carried away and sell all your AT&T holdings.

WHAT marvelous blood-chiller might have run from the quill pen of Edgar Allen Poe, master of the macabre, could he but have witnessed the advent of the unassuming little instrument which sits poised in Pandoric innocence in the dim light across the room from me? Certainly he, if anyone, would have recognized and delighted in its cleverness and in its amoebic reproduction and widespread dispersal until now only a fortunate few lie beyond its reach. Ironically and unfortunately, however, Mr. Poe succumbed a score and seven years before its creation.

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I speak, of course, of my telephone—that horrid little robot perched in plastic nonchalance atop the scarred table near the far wall to my left, its pock-marked orifice ever eager to thrust with equal calm upon my cringing ear a hideous diatribe, a vengeful threat, a crimson epitaph.

What dark reward was given the erudite Alexander G. Bell for foisting upon an unsuspecting humanity this insufferable little box with its strident voice and malevolent capabilities? Closed doors cannot hamper its reach, nor spans of great sea. Neither airplanes nor automobiles nor even vessels are safe from those inquisitive fingers.

True, there are many who remain cloddishly insensitive to its demands and dissertations and ultimate horror, but surely these souls are of a dullard lot who no more fear its demoniacal potentialities than does the moronically masticating cow fear the man who fattens her for eventual slaughter. But I digress.

Unlike Mr. Poe's diabolical devices which cut or burnt, crushed or entombed, this beastly thing attacks the brain. Slowly it dissolves defensive barriers and eases its loathsome way into the very depths of intellect, seeking out its weaknesses and then slowly, inexorably eating away at the very core of being.

SURELY not I alone of this vast humanity understand the peril! Granted, it has taken years for me to fully comprehend; but even so, now that I do in fact recognize this danger, it is so vividly apparent that certainly there must have been others before me who became cognizant of it. Why have they remained mute? Why were we left unwarned?

Gently it began its dreadful cycle; at first camouflaging itself as a herald of good tidings and bringing close those dear voices we know. Yet, in retrospect, it becomes clear that those utterances were only travesties. It is our joy at their seemingly familiar sound which so beclouds our sensibilities to the calculating brittleness from which they are constructed. No! These are not the voices of beloved friends and relations. These are merely the cunning, ventriloquistic efforts of a devilish machine to destroy the gates of caution and permit the gradual erosion of the mind.

And soon enough the gentleness fades and the crackling words bring grief and depression and hatred, but by now the conditioning is completed. At its grating voice we rush to answer, our audient canals stimulated like the salivary glands of Ivan Pavlov's poor starving dogs when the bell was rung. Are we such

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blind fools that not until so late do we see it; that not until we have become powerless to resist do we make such attempt?

It watches, sure now of eventual victory. From across the room I sense its larynx swell with shrill ebulliency and involuntarily my muscles bunch and cord to send me in answer to its summons . . . but there is only a deep, laughing silence. Like a sleek, shiny feline, this damnable instrument plays with me. And I—no longer a man but a quivering rodent—I weep silently and copiously and my very pores join in with great tears until I sit bathed in vile perspiration and I detect an odor and that odor is my fear.

THE DOOR is so near! Only a dozen feet across this musty carpeting it stares blankly at me while a small, dark insect zigzags across its broad, paint-flaked cheek. Beyond that portal there may be hope for me; on this side there is none. A strange somnambulism grips me and I rise, exulting inwardly as courageous legs carry my craven husk away from that terrible, poised thing on the table.

My trembling hand moistly surrounds the tarnished brass knob and then . . . *dear God!* . . . the jangling commences. Long, loud, with incessant discordancy it rebounds from the door and drives me deep into my gloomy chamber. I grip the thin black neck of the telephone and squeeze tightly as I raise it, in desperate attempt to throttle that maddening ring.

Swiftly then, unerringly, the receiver thrusts to my ear, dragging behind it my clenched, unwilling hand. It presses ever more tightly to my head and a desperate, horrible sound fills the room. It is the sound of my own scream. And, behind it can be heard the persistent, jubilant ring of a telephone.

* * *

In the bulbless, oppressive room a man plays the tight beam of his small flashlight over the figure on the floor. He is the coroner and the coroner is a competent man. He has seen many bodies and they no longer move him to emotion. . .

The two detectives nearby watch carelessly as the pathologist turns the head of the corpse so that the side which has been resting unnaturally on the dingy carpet can be seen. Suddenly he grunts and directs the beam to the spot where an ear should be, but there is none. He straightens then, snapping out the light, and in the dimness his pallid features reflect the hall light through the open door and he sways slightly.

"My God!" *he whispers hoarsely.* "His skull—it's . . . it's empty!"

THE END

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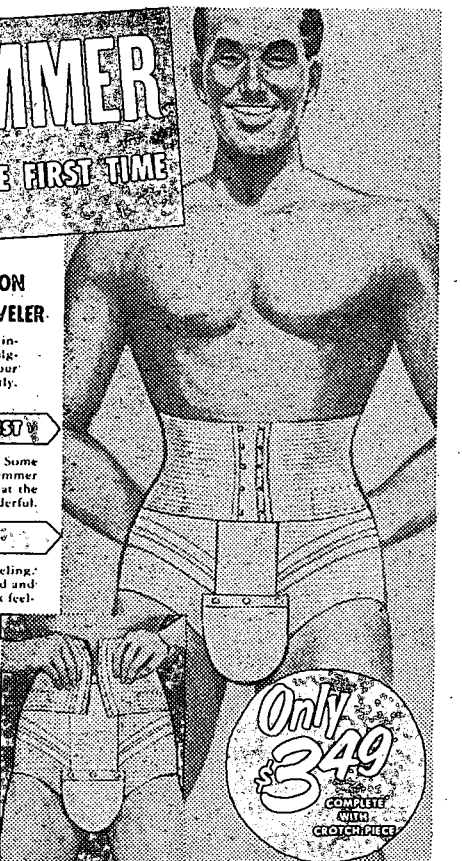

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The Dead Remember

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

Illustrator ADKINS

Introduction by Sam Moskowitz

THE writings and life of Robert Ervin Howard are destined to become a legend. His poetry and fiction continue to be reprinted both in book and magazine form and exploration of the realities of his life from as intensive a probing as the fictional realm of his Hyborian Age. To facilitate this intrinsically scholarly scrutiny, a new deluxe amatuer journal known as THE HOWARD COLLECTOR *has appeared in classically elegant form edited and published out of Box 775, Pasadena, Texas, by acolyte Glenn Lord.*

Robert E. Howard employed periodic pen names, among them Patrick Howard, Robert E. Patrick Howard, Patrick MacConaire Howard, Patrick Ervin and Sam Walser. The hunt for various Howard stories, of whatever variety, is relentlessly pursued by his enthusiastic followers. Howard wrote a wide variety of tales, including westerns, sports, oriental as well as weird. His stories may be located in journals ranging in subject matter from Knockout Stories *to* Spicy Adventure. *The best market he hit, shortly before his death, was* ARGOSY. *In that magazine he had published under his own name a series of humorous westerns which found considerable favor with the readers. Almost forgotten, however, was a brief ghost story,* The Dead Remember, *published in* ARGOSY, *Aug. 15, 1936. This story is not typical Howard in the sense of Conan or Soloman Kane, but to one who studies the story, there will be discovered an aptness for regional authenticity that was appreciated early by H. P. Lovecraft and a vivid naturalness in dialogue and handling of subject matter that smacks of the better modern mainstream writing. The people are alive and their reactions in character.*

In this tale we glimpse the rising maturity of talent, coupled with the obvious knowledge of the south, that we noted in Black Canaan (WEIRD TALES, *June, 1936*). *Howard's regionalism was not confined to the southwest.*

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It is in this context that the story should be read, for it represented a Howard moving toward naturalism and on the way to rising in the literary world above the supernatural media that nourished him.

To those who doubt that Howard could ever have attained true maturity in his writing, remembering that he committed suicide upon learning of his mother's death and reading into this action a hopeless psychological weakness, a vital fact must be presented. At least one of Robert E. Howard's last letters reveals that he had a bad heart which was a source of considerable worry to him. Rugged as he appeared outwardly, this physical drawback limited him. In evaluating Howard's final action, therefore, it is only fair to ask if the death of Howard's mother was merely another *element in his decision to take his life and not the only one.*

DODGE CITY, KANSAS,
November 3, 1877.

MR. WILLIAM L. GORDON,
Antioch, Texas.

DEAR BILL:

I am writing you because I have got a feeling I am not long for this world. This may surprise you, because you know I was in good health when I left the herd, and I am not sick now as far as that goes, but just the same I believe I am as good as a dead man.

Before I tell you why I think so, I will tell you the rest of what I have to say, which is that we got to Dodge City all right with the herd, which tallied 3,400 head, and the trail boss, John Elston, got twenty dollars a head from Mr. R. J. Blaine, but Joe Richards, one of the boys, was killed by a steer near the crossing of the Canadian. His sister, Mrs. Dick Westfall, lives near Seguin, and I wish you'd ride over and tell her about her brother. John Elston is sending her his saddle and bridle and gun and money.

Now, Bill, I will try to tell you why I know I'm a goner. You remember last August, just before I left for Kansas with the herd, they found that Old Joel, that used to be Colonel Henry's slave, and his woman dead—the ones that lived in that live-oak thicket down by Zavalla Creek. You know they called his woman Jezebel, and folks said she was a witch. She was a high-yellow gal and a lot younger than Joel. She told fortunes, and even some of the white folks were afraid of her. I took no stock in those stories.

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WELL, when we was rounding up the cattle for the trail drive, I found myself near Zavalla Creek along toward sundown, and my horse was tired, and I was hungry, and I decided I'd stop in at Joel's and make his woman cook me something to eat. So I rode up to his hut in the middle of the live-oak grove, and Joel was cutting some wood to cook some beef which Jezebel had stewing over an open fire. I remember she had on a red and green checked dress. I won't likely forget that.

They told me to light and I done so, and set down and ate a hearty supper, then Joel brought out a bottle of tequila and we had a drink, and I said I could beat him shooting craps. He asked me if I had any dice, and I said no, and he said he had some dice and would roll me for a five-cent piece.

So we got to shooting craps, and drinking tequila, and I got

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pretty full and raring to go, but Joel won all my money, which was about five dollars and seventy-five cents. This made me mad, and I told him I'd take another drink and get on my horse and ride. But he said the bottle was empty, and I told him to get some more. He said he didn't have no more, and I got madder, and begun to swear and abuse him, because I was pretty drunk. Jezebel come to the door of the hut and tried to get me to ride on, but I told her I was free, white and twenty-one, and for her to look out, because I didn't have no use for smart high-yellow gals.

Then Joel got mad and said, yes, he had some more tequila in the hut, but he wouldn't give me a drink if I was dying of thirst. So I said: "Why, damn you, you get me drunk and take my money with crooked dice, and now you insult me. I've seen nigras hung for less than that."

He said: "You can't eat my beef and drink my licker and then call my dice crooked. No white man can do that. I'm just as tough as you are."

I said: "Damn your black soul, I'll kick you all over this flat."

He said: "White man, you won't kick nobody." Then he grabbed up the knife he'd been cutting beef with, and ran at me. I pulled my pistol and shot him twice through the belly. He fell down and I shot him again, through the head.

Then Jezebel come running out screaming and cursing, with an old muzzle-loading musket. She pointed it at me and pulled the trigger, but the cap burst without firing the piece, and I yelled for her to get back or I'd kill her. But she run in on me and swung the musket like a club. I dodged and it hit me a glancing lick, tearing the hide on the side of my head, and I clapped my pistol against her bosom and jerked the trigger. The shot knocked her staggering back several foot, and she reeled and fell down on the ground, with her hand to her bosom and blood running out between her fingers.

I WENT over to her and stood looking down with the pistol in my hand, swearing and cursing her, and she looked up and said: "You've killed Joel and you've killed me, but by God, you won't live to brag about it. I curse you by the big snake and the black swamp and the white cock. Before this day rolls around again you'll be branding the devil's cows in hell. You'll see, I'll come to you when the time's ripe and ready."

Then the blood gushed out of her mouth and she fell back and I knew she was dead. Then I got scared and sobered up and got

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on my horse and rode. Nobody seen me, and I told the boys next day I got that bruise on the side of my head from a tree branch my horse had run me against. Nobody never knew it was me that killed them two, and I wouldn't be telling you now, only I know I have not got long to live.

That curse has been dogging me, and there is no use trying to dodge it. All the way up the trail I could feel something following me. Before we got to Red River I found a rattlesnake coiled up in my boot one morning, and after that I slept with my boots on all the time. Then when we was crossing the Canadian it was up a little, and I was riding point, and the herd got to milling for no reason at all, and caught me in the mill. My horse drowned, and I would have, too, if Steve Kirby hadn't roped me and dragged me out from amongst them crazy cows. Then one of the hands was cleaning a buffalo rifle one night, and it went off in his hands and blowed a hole in my hat. By this time the boys was joking and saying I was a hoodoo.

But after we crossed the Canadian, the cattle stampeded on the clearest, quietest night I ever seen. I was riding night-herd and didn't see nor hear nothing that might have started it, but one of the boys said just before the break he heard a low wailing sound down amongst a grove of cottonwoods, and saw a strange blue light glimmering there. Anyway, the steers broke so sudden and unexpected they nearly caught me and I had to ride for all I was worth. There was steers behind me and on both sides of me, and if I hadn't been riding the fastest horse ever raised in South Texas, they'd have trampled me to a pulp.

Well, I finally pulled out of the fringe of them, and we spent all next day rounding them up out of the breaks. That was when Joe Richards got killed. We was out in the breaks, driving in a bunch of steers, and all at once, without any reason I could see, my horse gave an awful scream and rared and fell backward with me. I jumped off just in time to keep from getting mashed, and a big mossy horn give a bellow and come for me.

There wasn't a tree bigger than a bush anywhere near, so I tried to pull my pistol, and some way the hammer got jammed under my belt, and I couldn't get it loose. That wild steer wasn't more than ten jumps from me when Joe Richards roped it, and the horse, a green one, was jerked down and sideways. As it fell, Joe tried to swing clear, but his spur caught in the back cinch, and the next instant that steer had drove both horns clean

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through him. It was an awful sight.

BY THAT time I had my pistol out, and I shot the steer, but Joe was dead. He was tore up something terrible. We covered him up where he fell, and put up a wood cross, and John Elston carved on the name and date with his bowie knife.

After that the boys didn't joke any more about me being a hoodoo. They didn't say much of anything to me and I kept to myself, though the Lord knows, it wasn't any fault of mine as I can see.

Well, we got to Dodge City and sold the steers. And last night I dreamt I saw Jezebel, just as plain as I see the pistol on my hip. She smiled like the devil himself and said something I couldn't understand, but she pointed at me, and I think I know what that means.

Bill, you'll never see me again. I'm a dead man. I don't know how I'll go out but I feel I'll never live to see another sunrise. So I'm writing you this letter to let you know about this business and I reckon I've been a fool but it looks like a man just kind of has to go it blind and there is not any blazed trail to follow.

Anyway, whatever takes me will find me on my feet with my pistol drawed. I never knuckled down to anything alive, and I won't even to the dead. I am going out fighting, whatever comes. I keep my scabbard-end tied down, and I clean and oil my pistol every day. And, Bill, sometimes I think I am going crazy, but I reckon it is just thinking and dreaming so much about Jezebel; because I am using an old shirt of yours for cleaning rags, you know that black and white checked shirt you got at San Antonio last Christmas, but sometimes when I am cleaning my pistol with them rags, they don't look black and white any more. They turn to red and green, just the color of the dress Jezebel was wearing when I killed her.

Your brother,
JIM.

STATEMENT OF JOHN ELSTON, NOVEMBER 4, 1877

MY NAME is John Elston. I am the foreman of Mr. J. J. Connolly's ranch in Gonzales County, Texas. I was trail boss of the herd that Jim Gordon was employed on. I was sharing his hotel room with him. The morning of the third of November he seemed moody and wouldn't talk much. He would not go out with me, but said he was going to write a letter.

I did not see him again until that night. I came into the room to get something and he was cleaning his Colt's .45. I laughed

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and jokingly asked him if he was afraid of Bat Masterson, and he said: "John, what I'm afraid of ain't human, but I'm going out shooting if I can." I laughed and asked him what he was afraid of, and he said: "A high-yeller gal that's been dead four months." I thought he was drunk, and went on out. I don't know what time that was, but it was after dark.

I didn't see him again alive. About midnight I was passing the Big Chief saloon and I heard a shot, and a lot of people ran into the saloon. I heard somebody say a man was shot. I went in with the rest, and went on back into the back room. A man was lying in the doorway, with his legs out in the alley and his body in the door. He was covered with blood, but by his build and clothes I recognized Jim Gordon. He was dead. I did not see him killed, and know nothing beyond what I have already said.

STATEMENT OF MIKE O'DONNELL

MY name is Michael Joseph O'Donnell. I am the bartender in the Big Chief saloon on the night-shift. A few minutes before midnight I noticed a cowboy talking to Sam Grimes just outside the saloon. They seemed to be arguing. After awhile the cowboy came on in and took a drink of whiskey at the bar. I noticed him because he wore a pistol, whereas the others had theirs out of sight, and because he looked so wild and pale. He looked like he was drunk, but I don't believe he was. I never saw a man who looked just like him.

I did not pay much attention to him after that because I was very busy tending bar. I suppose he must have gone on into the back room. At about midnight I heard a shot in the back room and Tom Allison ran out saying that a man had been shot. I was the first one to reach him. He was lying partly in the door and partly in the alley. I saw he wore a gun-belt and a Mexican carved holster and believed it to be the same man I had noticed earlier. His right hand was torn practically off, being just a mass of bloody tatters. His head was shattered in a way I had never seen caused by a gunshot. He was dead by the time I got there and it is my opinion he was killed instantly. While we were standing around him a man I knew to be John Elston came through the crowd and said: "My God, it's Jim Gordon!"

STATEMENT OF DEPUTY GRIMES

MY name is Sam Grimes. I am a deputy sheriff of Ford County, Kansas. I met the deceased, Jim Gordon, before the Big Chief saloon, at about twenty minutes until twelve, Novem-

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ber 3rd. I saw he had his pistol buckled on, so I stopped him and asked him why he was carrying his pistol and if he did not know it was against the law. He said he was packing it for protection. I told him if he was in danger it was my business to protect him, and he had better take his gun back to his hotel and leave it there till he was ready to leave town, because I saw by his clothes that he was a cowboy from Texas. He laughed and said: "Deputy, not even Wyatt Earp could protect me from my fate!" He went into the saloon.

I believed he was sick and out of his head, so I did not arrest him. I thought maybe he would take a drink and then go and leave his gun at his hotel as I had requested. I kept watching him to see that he did not make any play toward anybody in the saloon, but he noticed no one, took a drink at the bar, and went on into the back room.

A few minutes later a man ran out, shouting that somebody was killed. I went right to the back room, getting there just as Mike O'Donnell was bending over the man, who I believed to be the one I had accosted in the street. He had been killed by the bursting of the pistol in his hand. I don't know who he was shooting at, if anybody. I found nobody in the alley, nor anybody who had seen the killing except Tom Allison. I did find pieces of the pistol that had exploded, together with the end of the barrel, which I turned over to the coroner.

STATEMENT OF TOM ALLISON

MY name is Thomas Allison. I am a teamster, employed by McFarlane & Company. On the night of November 3rd, I was in the Big Chief saloon. I did not notice the deceased when he came in. There was a lot of men in the saloon. I had had several drinks but was not drunk. I saw "Grizzly" Gullins, a buffalo hunter, approaching the entrance of the saloon. I had had trouble with him, and knew he was a bad man. He was drunk and I did not want any trouble. I decided to go out the back way.

I went through the back room and saw a man sitting at a table with his head in his hands. I took no notice of him, but went on to the back door, which was bolted on the inside. I lifted the bolt and opened the door and started to step outside.

Then I saw a woman standing in front of me. The light was dim that streamed out into the alley through the open door, but I saw her plain enough to tell she was a Negro woman. I don't know how she was dressed. She was not pure black but a light brown or yellow. I could tell that in the dim light. I was so surprised I

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stopped short, and she spoke to me and said: "Go tell Jim Gordon I've come for him."

I said: "Who the devil are you and who is Jim Gordon?" She said: "The man in the back room sitting at the table; tell him I've come!"

Something made me turn cold all over, I can't say why. I turned around and went back into the room, and said: "Are you Jim Gordon?" The man at the table looked up and I saw his face was pale and haggard. I said: "Somebody wants to see you." He said: "Who wants to see me, stranger?" I said: "A high-yellow woman there at the back door."

With that he heaved up from the chair, knocking it over along with the table. I thought he was crazy and fell back from him. His eyes were wild. He gave a kind of strangled cry and rushed to the open door. I saw him glare out into the alley, and thought I heard a laugh from the darkness. Then he screamed again and jerked out his pistol and threw down on somebody I couldn't see.

There was a flash that blinded me and a terrible report, and when the smoke cleared a little, I saw the man lying in the door with his head and body covered with blood. His brains were oozing out, and there was blood all over his right hand. I ran to the front of the saloon, shouting for the bartender. I don't know whether he was shooting at the woman or not, or if anybody shot back. I never heard but the one shot, when his pistol burst.

CORONER'S REPORT

WE, the coroner's jury, having held inquest over the remains of James A. Gordon, of Antioch, Texas, have reached a verdict of death by accidental gunshot wounds, caused by the bursting of the deceased's pistol, he having apparently failed to remove a cleaning rag from the barrel after cleaning it. Portions of the burnt rag were found in the barrel. They had evidently been a piece of a woman's red and green checked dress.

Signed:

J. S. Ordley, Coroner,
Richard Donovan,
Ezra Blaine,
Joseph T. Decker,
Jack Wiltshaw,
Alexander V. Williams

THE END

When answering advertisements—please say you saw it in FANTASTIC

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(Continued from page 6)

ity of this idle wish coming true?

Clarence Marlow
7783 N. Dacauter Dr., N.E.
Atlanta, Ga.

● *How many more of you would be interested in a series of profiles of famous fantasy writers? And, if so, which authors would you most want to be Moskowitz-ed?*

Dear Editor:

I really enjoyed the first part of the serial, "Magnanthropus" and I am looking forward to the concluding part.

Incidently I am very much for serials, especially ones like "Second Ending," "Worlds Of The Imperium" and the afore mentioned "Magnanthropus" which you have been publishing lately.

I agree wholeheartedly with Mr. Greco. I feel that David R. Bunch is a real top notcher and I would like to see more Moderan Stories. Readers who agree with me, write in!

Arnold Katz
98 Patton Blvd.
New Hyde Park, N. Y.

● *Here's a man sure to stir up trouble if he likes both serials* and *Bunch! How about a serial by Bunch? Or a bunch of serials?*

Dear Editor:

In the May issue of FANTASTIC you began a Classic Reprint Department. Although I approve of the idea, I enjoyed the stories selected so far, individually and as a unit, with certain reservations:

(1) "Garden Of Fear" by R. E. Howard, the first in the series, was something of a let-down after "King Conan". My main disappointment was in the childishly simple plot and the lack of explanation Howard usually provides in his tales.

(2) "The Cosmic Relic" by E. F. Russell, has a good beginning, but quickly deteriorated into a rather mediocre novelette in which the hero assumed absolutely too much.

(3) "The Creator" by C. D. Simak, is undoubtedly the best story to be reprinted and the only classic so far.

(4) As "The Creator" was the best, so "The Root Of Ampoi" was the worst. I had never read any Clark Ashton Smith before, and taking this as an example, I hope I never have to suffer the ordeal again.

(5) After I read "Ship Of Darkness" by A. E. van Vogt, I had the confused feeling that it is a chopped-down novel with large details and descriptions completely wiped out and only a bare, skeleton story remaining.

Except for "The Creator", the stories in this department were

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not worth reprinting and most definitely do not represent the author's best work, which is the definition usually given a classic. Howard has done much better in his Conan series and I'm sure the other authors have too, even Clark Ashton Smith.

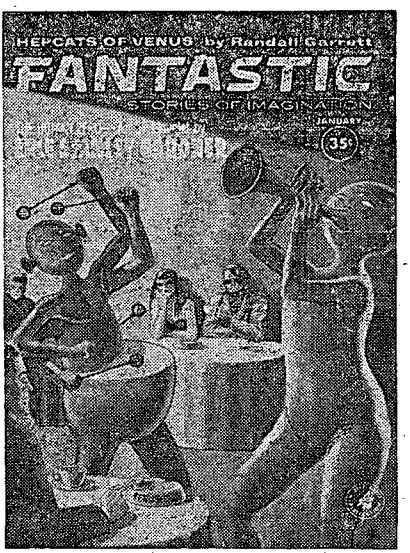
As for suggestions, I highly recommend "The Scarlet Citadel", by Howard, which has been praised as one of the best mixtures of adventure and fantasy ever written.

T. Sturgeon's "Excalibur And

(Continued on page 130)

COMING NEXT MONTH

Looking for a reading experience that is way out? Read January FANTASTIC!



True humor is seldom an adjunct of the best science-fantasy stories. To remedy this situation, the January Fantastic has **Randall Garrett** recounting the amazing adventures of *The Hepcats from Venus*—a tale well calculated to keep you away from expresso joints for the next several months.

But the main attraction of the January issue of FANTASTIC is a little-known science-fantasy novelet written by the famous detective-story author, **Erle Stanley Gardner.** *The Human Zero* is Gardner at his unexpected best.

In addition: short stories and all our regular departments. Be sure to reserve a copy of the January Fantastic, which will be on sale at your newsstand Dec. 21.

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(Continued from page 128)

The Atom" is also considered a classic. And last of all, A. Merrit couldn't possibly do FANTASTIC any harm.

Bill Pearce
789 Ponce de Leon Avenue
Macon, Ga.

● *Many of our reprint selections are chosen, not as examples of a writer's "best," but as examples of his style, his ideas; as examples of his lesser-known work; as examples of some of his fantasy philosophy. Another point we must consider is that not always is a story we* want *to reprint* available *for reprint.*

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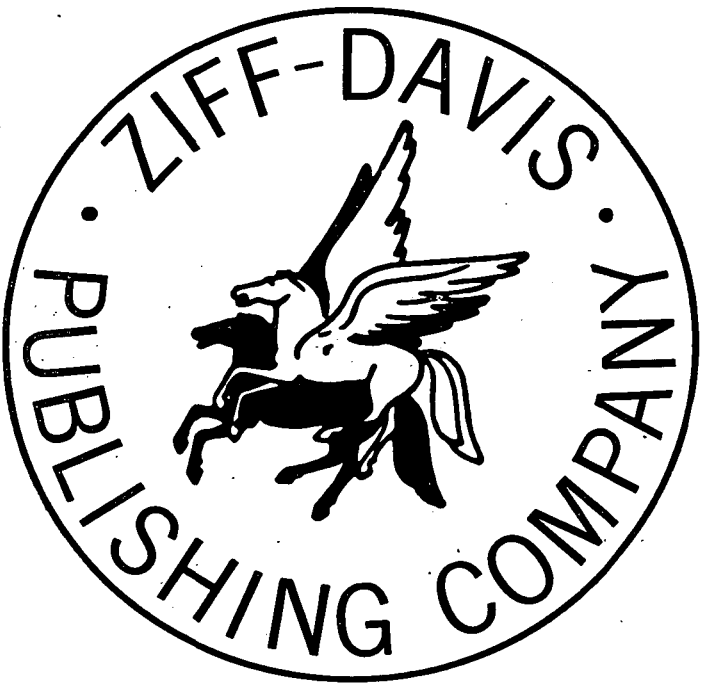

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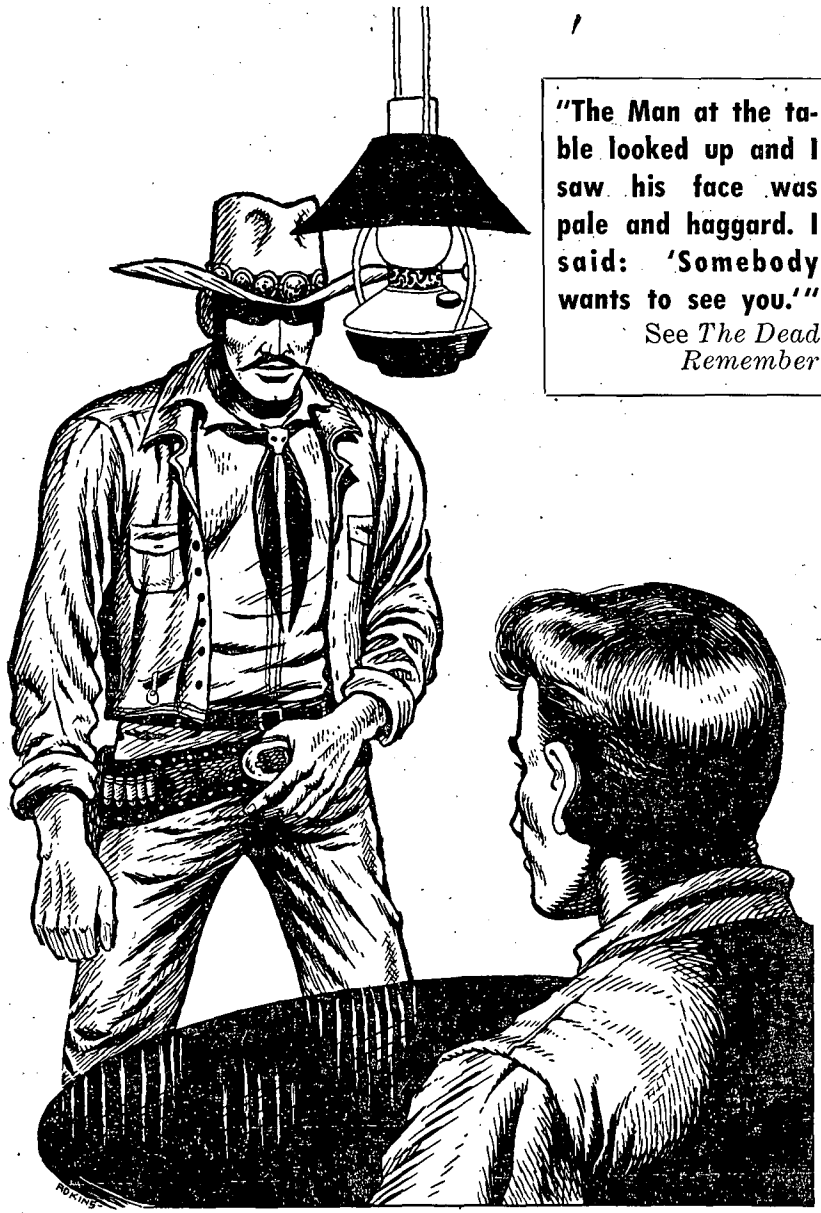

"The Man at the table looked up and I saw his face was pale and haggard. I said: 'Somebody wants to see you.'"

See *The Dead Remember*

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